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Modernization & the Role of Intellectuals

The concept of modernization

There are probably few concepts as ambiguous and elusive as that of modernization. As one study of the concept has aptly put it: 'The popularity of the notion of modernization must be sought not in its clarity and precision as a vehicle of scholarly communication, but rather in its ability to evoke vague and generalized images which serve to summarize all the various transformations of social life attendant upon the rise of industrialization and the nation-state in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.'¹

What exactly modern is has shifted with individual perceptions and preconceptions. Yet the concept, by reason of its practical utility, has permeated writings about the recent history of what is variously called 'the developing world', 'the third world' or 'the South'. Nor has the concept been confined to this category of countries. The modernization of countries like Japan and China, which do not quite fit into the category, has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Indeed, all countries have their modern period of history, that of western Europe at one end of the spectrum going back to the sixteenth century while in some countries of Africa and Asia the onset of the period is deferred until the twentieth.

A fundamental problem of the concept has been its ethnocentric bias, that is its close association with the Western experience. A result of this association has been that modernization has all too often been synonymous with Westernization. Thus, some of the major experiences of the West, such as industrialization and the growth of democratic institutions, have come

¹ Dean C. Tipps, 'Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective', in Cyril E. Black, ed., *Comparative Modernization. A Reader* (1976): 62. For a penetrating analysis of the tyranny of Westernization, see Serge Latouche, *The Westernization of the World. The Significance, Scope and Limits of the Drive towards Global Uniformity*, trans. Rosemary Morris (1996).

to serve, consciously or unconsciously, as the yardsticks for the modernization of a society. Such an identification of the concept with the Western experience is not difficult to understand, given the fact that it has been Western social scientists, and particularly American social scientists,² who have popularized it. This is not to say, however, that attempts have not been made to come up with more universal definitions of the concept. A notable effort in this regard is the conference on modern Japan held in the United States in the early 1960s which, among other things, grappled with the issue precisely of such a broad definition of the concept. The group of Japanese and American scholars came to the following global – as distinct from exclusively Western – attributes of modernization:

- a relatively large urban population and an increasingly urban orientation of society;
- greater use of inanimate energy;
- extensive interaction among members of society;
- widespread literacy attended by secularism and scientific orientation;
- an ‘extensive and penetrative network of mass communication’;
- bureaucratization of social and political institutions; and
- emergence of the nation-state and the growth of international relations.³

Yet a closer look suggests that these indices of modernization appear to pertain more to the stage of its consummation than to its beginning or to its intermediate stage. For a more graduated appraisal of modernization, we have to turn to Cyril Black, whose *Reader* in comparative modernization (cited above) was preceded by an ambitious effort to survey the process of modernization on a global scale.⁴ He identified seven patterns of modernization corresponding in large measure to the time of the initiation of the process. Historical precedence is given in this tabulated appraisal to the United Kingdom and France, followed by the United States and the British dominions. The other European countries belong to the third pattern, the Latin American ones to the fourth, and Ethiopia with a small group of Asian countries (Russia, Japan, China, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan and Thailand) falls into the fifth. Finally, the sixth and seventh patterns are reserved on the whole for Asian and African countries, respectively, which had extended periods of colonial rule.⁵ Elaborating on the fifth pattern to which Ethiopia belongs and which was said to have been characterized by a strategy of ‘limited or defensive modernization’, Black says: ‘What these societies have in common is the fact that their traditional governments were sufficiently effective, because of long experience with centralized bureaucratic government, to enable them to resist direct and comprehensive foreign rule for a prolonged period in modern times.’⁶

² *Ibid.*: 71.

³ John Whitney Hall, ‘Changing Conceptions of the Modernization of Japan’, in Marius B. Jansen, ed., *Changing Japanese Attitudes toward Modernization* (1965): 19.

⁴ Cyril E. Black, *The Dynamics of Modernization. A Study in Comparative History* (1966).

⁵ *Ibid.*: 90–4.

⁶ *Ibid.*: 119, 120.

While broadly indicative of the general pattern of modernization, Black's classification is not without its problems. He himself seems to be aware of this when he adds the qualification that 'No two societies modernize in quite the same way.'⁷ Although Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Thailand do seem to have a lot in common, it would appear to stretch things a bit too far to put them in the same category as Russia or, for that matter, Japan and China. Secondly, the year 1924 which has been singled out as the decisive moment for the consolidation of modernizing leadership does not appear very convincing for Ethiopia. Ras Tafari's tour of Europe, which apparently prompted the selection of that year, may have opened the eyes of the prince and his entourage to Western achievements. But it did not as such constitute a decisive moment in the domestic balance of power. More important in that respect would be the coronation of Haylä-Sellasé in 1930 or the promulgation of the first constitution in 1931.

A similar attempt to place the modernization process in Africa in a global context, albeit with reference to the West, was made by Philip Curtin in his book *Africa and the West*. He classifies the various experiences in this respect into two broad categories: modernizers and traditionalists. The first group is further subdivided into three shades of outright Westernizers, what are described as 'utopian modernizers' (including Marxist revolutionaries) and neo-traditionalists who aspire for a compromise between Western values and tradition. The traditionalists are likewise said to have three manifestations: the ordinary conservatives, the utopian reactionaries (with millennial and fundamentalist overtones) and the defensive modernizers who could easily shift into the neo-traditionalist pattern in the modernizers' camp.⁸

There are two problems with this classification. The first, already referred to, is its heavy dependence on Western paradigms. The second, which Curtin himself seems to be aware of, is the blurred distinction between what he has characterized as the neo-traditionalists and the defensive modernizers. Indeed, as he illustrates,⁹ it is possible for countries to start with a programme of defensive modernization and shift to unabashed Westernization, as was the case in China, Japan and Turkey; or, as happened in so many colonial situations, blind imitation of the West was often followed by critical reappraisal and a return to traditional values.

East meets West

Of all the experiences of modernization in the last two centuries, few have been as fascinating as that of Japan. The pre-eminent position that American academia held in the study of modernization in the period after the second world war was itself a reflection of their country's political and

⁷ *Ibid.*: 95.

⁸ Philip D. Curtin, ed., *Africa and the West. Intellectual Responses to European Culture* (1972): 234-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 238-41.

military interest in Japan. Moreover, what has come to be known as the Japanese miracle, the industrial transformation of Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century, has itself provided a model for other Asian and African countries in their quest for rapid modernization. Thus, comparison of Japanese modernization with processes elsewhere in Asia, Africa and the Arab world have not been lacking.¹⁰ The Japanese themselves have taken this matter so seriously that they have set up a famous and well-endowed institution known as the Institute of Developing Economies.¹¹ One of the themes discussed at a conference co-sponsored by the United Nations University in Tokyo in 1982 was also the question of what lessons might be drawn from the Japanese experience of modernization.¹²

The Japanese experience has been compared and contrasted, as the case may be, with that of China, Thailand and the Arab world.¹³ In the African continent, too, the Meiji restoration did not pass without a ripple. We shall examine below in more detail the impact that it had on Ethiopian intellectuals of the early twentieth century. Another African country where emulation of the Japanese example became almost a passion was the French colony of Madagascar (Malagasy). In the second decade of the twentieth century, inspired by a series of articles on Japan by a Protestant pastor by the name of Ravelojaona, a secret society of intellectuals and prelates known as the VVS (which in the local language stood for 'iron, stone and network') sprang up determined to repeat the Japanese experience of development in independence. Alarmed by the dangerous potentialities of the movement, the French authorities clamped down on the leaders of the movement on convenient charges of colluding with the avowed enemy, Germany.¹⁴

But these comparisons with Japan and attempts to emulate her experience in modernization suffered all too often from inadequate understanding of pre-Meiji Japanese history, or what Ian Inkster (cited above) has characterized as 'historical particularity, ignorance and contextual inappropriateness'.¹⁵ The gist of the matter was that Tokugawa Japan had

¹⁰ See, in this respect, the critical analysis of Ian Inkster, *Japan as a Development Model? Relative Backwardness and Technological Transfer* (1980) as well as the contrast with the Indian experience drawn by Ingeborg Y. Wendt, *Japanische Dynamik und Indische Stagnation? Eine Antwort auf theoretische Entwicklungsmodelle* (1978).

¹¹ For a sample of the Institute's numerous publications in the sphere of development modelling, see Tetteh A. Kofi, *Institutional Model of Development and Underdevelopment: A Comparative Analysis of the West and Japan and the Third World* (1979).

¹² Takeshi Hayashi, 'Some Lessons from Japan's Modernization', in Michio Nagai, ed., *Development in the Non-Western World* (1984).

¹³ Sunchai Wun'Gaeo, 'Continuities and Discontinuities in Japanese Social Structure: Toward a Sociology of Thai Perception', in Kunio Yoshihara, ed., *Thai Perceptions of Japanese Modernization* (1989): 46; Seif El-Wady Romahi, 'Diplomacy of Resources in Arab-Japanese Relations: Economic Survey and Political Analysis', in *Arab-Japanese Relations: Tokyo Symposium* (1980): 31, 33; Raouf Abbas Hamed, *The Japanese and Egyptian Enlightenment. A Comparative Study of Fukuzawa Yukichi and Rif'a'ah al-Tahtawi* (1990).

¹⁴ Mervyn Brown, *Madagascar Rediscovered. A History from Early Times to Independence* (1978): 259-60; Pierre V erin, *Madagascar* (1990): 163-4.

¹⁵ Inkster: i.

assets which made the task of rapid modernization easy. These assets, which were not always so readily available in the countries which were compared with Japan, included cultural homogeneity, a high rate of literacy, extensive urbanization, a strong mercantile base, developed cottage industries and a long period of peace.¹⁶

A good instance of such divergence in the modernization experience is the case of Thailand (formerly Siam). At about the same time that Japan was undergoing the Meiji revolution, Thailand was experiencing its own version of reform under its enlightened king, Chulalongkorn. He and his enthusiastic followers, interestingly enough known as the Young Siam, were able to introduce a series of institutional reforms known in history as the Cahkkri reformation. Japan and Thailand shared the same advantage of cultural homogeneity, but Thailand could not achieve the same depth and intensity of modernization as Japan. Factors that have been adduced to explain this divergence include Thailand's lower literacy rate, the stagnant nature of its agriculture, its lukewarm approach to the import of foreign technology, the orientation of its educational system towards public administration rather than science and technology and its much smaller consumer population.¹⁷

In light of the above considerations, a more instructive approach to the study of modernization would be to examine the process in each country within the context of its own peculiar history, for, as already suggested, no two countries can have the same point of departure or follow the same path of development. For our purposes, since it is impossible to examine all experiences, we shall focus on the countries whose history of modernization has had the closest bearing on the Ethiopian situation.

Russia, with its Orthodox Christian background and subsequent revolutionary transformation, provides some striking parallels with Ethiopia, although admittedly the differences are as important, if not more. Russia's interaction with the West could be said to have started with the rise of Peter the Great (1682–1725) and attained its climax with the 1917 revolution. Likewise, one can say that the process of modern transformation in Ethiopia, first tentatively suggested by Emperor Tēwodros in the mid-nineteenth century, attained its finale in the 1974 revolution. The Russian process of Westernization, with which the course of Russian intellectual history was closely associated, was initiated by the nobility but soon came to be appropriated by the educated elite, the intelligentsia. It is to Russian intellectual history that we owe that highly captivating term. First coined

¹⁶ Douglas H. Mendel, 'Japan as a Model for Developing Nations', in Edmund Skrzypczak, ed., *Japan's Modern Century* (1968): 191–6. See also Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (1974): 448–52, 455–6.

¹⁷ Yasukichi Yasuba and Likhit Dhiravegin, 'Initial Conditions, Institutional Changes, Policy, and their Consequences: Siam and Japan, 1850–1914', in Kazushi Ohkawa and Gustav Ranis, eds, *Japan and the Developing Countries: A Comparative Analysis* (1985): 19–29; Sommai Hoontrakool, 'A Comparative Study of the Economic and Political Developments in Japan and Thailand between 1868 and 1912', in Andrew J.L. Armour, ed., *Asia and Japan. The Search for Modernization and Identity* (1985): 66–80.

by a rather obscure novelist in the 1860s,¹⁸ it came to have a currency well beyond the specific time and place for which it was originally meant. The term had the connotation not only of a critical and independent spirit but also of a commitment to revolutionary transformation. It could be described as the Russian version of the *philosophes* of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment or the Romantics of the early nineteenth century, 'both in its headily ideological temper and in its impact on the world'.¹⁹

The most striking feature of the Russian intelligentsia, from the Decembrists to the Bolsheviks, was the passion, single-mindedness and sense of urgency with which they tackled the issues of the day. As one observer stated: 'One of the most engaging qualities of the Russian intellectuals of the old regime is the moral passion with which they attacked the great questions of the human condition, and their pursuit to a ruthlessly logical conclusion – in life no less than in thought – of the heady answers such exalted inquiry invariably brings.'²⁰

Such passion and sense of urgency has been admirably encapsulated in the titles of some of their famous treatises, such as 'Who is to Blame?', 'What is to be Done?' or 'Who are the Friends of the People?'. Another aspect of this singular commitment is the earnestness with which the Russian intelligentsia championed the ideas of change, ideas which were rarely of Russian origin. This is how Isaiah Berlin describes this sense of total commitment:

that objective truth exists, that it can be discovered, and that life, individual and social, can be lived in its light – this belief is more characteristic of the Russians than of anyone else in the modern world ... It is this faith that, for good or ill, has enabled it [i.e. the vanguard of the Russian intelligentsia] to move mountains ... it surrendered itself to what it believed to be true with a lifelong singleness of purpose seldom known outside of religious life in the West.²¹

In view of China's long record of civilization and eventual adoption of the communist system, its experience might also be apposite for a discussion of modernization in Ethiopia. What set the Chinese experience apart from the Russian one was the long ancestry of what one may call bureaucratic intellectuals, the mandarins, and the deeply entrenched Confucian world-view. Facing the challenge of the West in the mid-nineteenth century, an enlightened segment of the feudal ruling class emerged urging understanding of the West in order to compete and survive. These progressive intellectuals urged reform by an enlightened monarchy to avert revolution from below. But side by side with this reformist movement went a series of

¹⁸ Martin Malia, 'What is the Intelligentsia?', in Richard Pipes, ed., *The Russian Intelligentsia* (1961): 1. The suggestion is made that it may have been derived from the Latin word *intellegentia*, meaning 'discernment' or 'intelligence'.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*: 1.

²¹ In Marc Raeff, *Russian Intellectual History, an Anthology* (1966): 6. See also Benjamin Schwartz, 'The Intelligentsia in Communist China. A Tentative Comparison', in Richard Pipes, ed., *The Russian Intelligentsia* (1961): 166ff.

peasant uprisings which culminated in the Taiping rebellion. Couched in millenarian and egalitarian phraseology, this mass movement rejected both the West and the conservative Confucian tradition.

In the wake of China's traumatic defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894, a more militant and large-scale reform movement was born. Through its organ, *The Chronicle of China and the World*, this movement popularized the reforms of Peter the Great of Russia and the Meiji Restoration in Japan. In the forefront of the movement for the emulation of the Meiji experience was the Chinese intellectual Huang Tsun-hsien, who urged the adoption of such reforms as the rationalization of bureaucracy, promotion of trade and industry, codification of laws, upgrading of the military, according dignity to manual labour and the simplification of the writing system.²² Translations of Western classics included Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* and J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*.²³

But the Meiji experience could not be repeated in China, thereby leaving the revolutionary option as the only plausible one. The first two decades of the twentieth century pitted reformers and revolutionaries against one another. From this confrontation was born the nationalist movement led by the famous Sun-Yat Sen, 'the dominant revolutionary personality, the center of gravity ... around which revolved a constellation of intellectual activists and politicized students who sought an end to Manchu overlordship and to the Confucian monarchy itself'.²⁴ Sun's heirs eventually diverged into the two antithetical branches of the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, now crystallized into the two disparate politics of Taiwan and mainland China.

Another country whose experience might be of pertinence to Ethiopia is Turkey. In the first half of the nineteenth century, a number of Turks who had the opportunity to travel in the West came back struck forcefully by their country's backwardness, particularly in the spheres of industry and science but ultimately in the mode of governance as well. This acute awareness gave rise to a movement known as the Young Ottomans (intended to embrace the entire Ottoman empire and modelled after similar movements in Europe such as that of Young Italy). The movement was inspired by the poet Namik Kemal and included in its leadership members of the ruling elite like Mustafa Fazil, the disgruntled brother of Khedive Isma'il of Egypt who had forfeited his title to the Egyptian throne because of a change in the law of succession. The granting of a constitution by the Ottoman sultan Abdul Aziz in 1876 appeared to be a fulfilment of the Young Ottoman dream.²⁵

But the experiment in constitutional government was short-lived. Probably because of this, the reformist Young Ottomans were soon superseded by the more militant Young Turks. Founded in 1889, the centenary

²² Noriko Kamachi, *Reform in China. Huang Tsun-hsien and the Japanese Model* (1981): 167, 259.

²³ He Zhaowu, *An Intellectual History of China* (1991): 422-3, 431ff., 461-2, 480.

²⁴ Jerome B. Grieder, *Intellectuals and the State in Modern China. A Narrative History* (1981): 135.

²⁵ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1965): 127-33, 149-54, 170.

of the French revolution, by students of the Imperial Military Medical School and modelled after the secret Italian society known as the Carbonari, the Young Turk movement, which later developed into the Committee of Union and Progress, aimed at nothing short of the overthrow of the sultan. A coup that the committee planned in 1896 was aborted. On the question of nationalities, which was so vital in a heterogeneous society like the Ottoman empire, it urged its resolution within the context of 'general reforms in Turkey'.²⁶

As in so many other Asian and African countries, the Japanese experience in modernization began to arouse interest in Turkey at the turn of the century, although it was difficult to imagine two more incongruous political entities than homogeneous Japan and the heterogeneous Ottoman empire.²⁷ The Young Turks managed to come to power in 1908 through what amounted to a military coup d'état, or, as one writer put it, a 'model for military intervention in politics'.²⁸ Motivated by the desire to restore constitutional government, they ended up by injecting an authoritarian tone into Turkish politics. Determined to save the empire, they presided over its dissolution. Yet on the ashes of the old empire was born the new and vigorous Turkey of Kemal Atatürk, who opted for a policy of unambiguous Westernization.²⁹

In Egypt, which is geographically – and historically – nearer to Ethiopia, modernization began with the new dynasty inaugurated in 1805 by the Albanian adventurer, Muhammad Ali, in the wake of the brief but significant Napoleonic occupation (1799–1801). Muhammad's long reign was characterized not only by territorial expansion but also the development of agriculture, the expansion of education and the dissemination of ideas through translation and publication. A distinctive aspect of this intellectual revival was the fact that it was all conducted under the patronage and in the service of the state. As P.J. Vatikiotis sums it up:

The first educators and intellectuals in nineteenth-century Egypt were essentially state officials performing specialized tasks of teaching, translation and writing. Their aim was to transmit knowledge from Europe in the service of the State, and they were selected by the ruler to perform these tasks. Their primary duty for a period of fifty years (1830–1880) was to instruct an ever-increasing number of Egyptians to become qualified, competent public servants. It was not their role or function as intellectuals to question or criticize, in order to undermine, the prevailing political order.³⁰

²⁶ Ernest Edmonson Ramsaur, *The Young Turks. Prelude to the Revolution of 1908* (1965): 14–41.

²⁷ For Turkish fascination with the Japanese model, see Selcuk Esenbel, 'Japanese Studies in Turkey: A New Field since the 1980s', *Nichibunken Newsletter* (1990): 5–7. A critical and comparative appraisal of Japanese and Turkish modernization is to be found in the concluding chapter in R.E. Ward and D.A. Rustow, eds, *Political Modernization in Japan and Turkey* (1964): 434–68.

²⁸ Feroz Ahmad, *The Young Turks. The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics 1908–1914* (1969): 163.

²⁹ For further assessments of the Young Turks, see Lewis: 208–9, 222–3; Ahmad: 15–17, 152–62.

³⁰ P.J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Egypt*, 3rd edn (1985): 121.

What is also remarkable about the whole process is the fact that Al Azhar University, which had hitherto epitomized the Islamic educational establishment, adjusted itself to the new situation and was to produce 'from its ranks the first Egyptians to make their mark in the modern educational and intellectual renaissance'.³¹ Throughout the nineteenth century a cautious attempt to reconcile the new ideas of the West with the old values of Islam was to be the hallmark of that intellectual awakening. Nobody symbolized that effort better than Rifa'ah al-Tahtawi, generally regarded as the spiritual father of Egyptian and Arab nationalism. His most famous work was the *Rihla*, an illuminating diary of his five-year stay in France (1826–31). He was also instrumental in the opening of the School of Languages, which was to play a seminal role in the field of translation that was so essential to the dissemination of Western ideas.

As in Turkey, the early liberal phase of intellectual awakening was superseded in the twentieth century by a more militantly nationalistic and strictly Islamic movement under the name of Young Egypt. In contrast to similar movements elsewhere that had had the 'Young' attribute, the Egyptian rendition exhibited some Fascist tendencies; it developed links with the Fascists in Italy and the Nazis in Germany and its paramilitary youth organization was called the Green Shirts, so reminiscent of the Fascist Black Shirts. This characteristic probably had as much to do with the time of the establishment of the association as with the overriding character of Egyptian nationalist resentment at British overlordship. As so often, the old adage 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend' became operative. The association was founded by a lawyer, Ahmad Husayn, in 1933, ten years after Mussolini's famous march on Rome and in the very same year that Hitler seized power in Germany. Along with the even more fundamentalist group known as the Muslim Brothers, Young Egypt produced a number of the radical army officers who rallied behind Gamal Abdel Nasser to topple the Muhammad Ali dynasty and establish the new Egyptian republic in 1952.³²

Elsewhere in much of Africa, European colonialism held sway from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. Modernization, as we have tried to perceive it here, came about through the midwifery of colonial rule. African reaction to that process generally followed the pattern of initial adoption followed by critical rejection. In a succinct survey of African reaction to colonial rule, the Ghanaian historian Adu Boahen has identified two major phases, a reformist and a revolutionary one, with the Fascist Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 serving as the cut-off point. In the first phase, while the rural masses sometimes resorted to rebellion and insurrection to overthrow colonial rule (such as the *Chimurenga* in Zimbabwe and the *Maji Maji* in Tanzania), the elite tended to prefer legal measures to mitigate the excesses of colonial rule. They did this through the agency of the press, trade unions and a host of cultural and professional associations and societies. Another way of protesting against the cultural

³¹ *Ibid.*: 91.

³² *Ibid.*: 318–30.

domination of the colonial rulers and asserting African identity was through the independent churches (Ethiopian or pentecostal) that cropped up in many parts of Africa, particularly in the south and east.³³

The focal point, as far as elite response to colonial rule was concerned, was colonial education, which produced the elite that first served colonial rule and subsequently became its grave-digger. It was by and large from the ranks of the colonial civil service that the leaders of the nationalist movement fighting for independence emerged, for, as one observer has summarized, 'innovations introduced with one objective in mind may have effects that outweigh and even counteract the original objective'.³⁴ The revolution that swept across the continent in 1960, when colony after colony attained independence, was prophesied decades before by Africa's pioneer intellectuals.³⁵

This process of adoption and rejection or, perhaps more accurately, using the instrument of the West against itself can be seen in the case of Nigeria and Ghana. In Nigeria, Western education, which one observer has described as 'one of the most revolutionary influences operative ... since the beginning of the European intrusion',³⁶ succeeded in giving that multi-ethnic entity its *lingua franca* (English) and a new political elite. Sponsorship for that education came mainly from the missionaries and in spite of official colonial policy which had sought to buttress the traditional authorities as partners of indirect rule. That is one reason why modern education made less headway in the predominantly Muslim and hierarchically organized north than among the Yoruba and the Ibo.

Official British caution was not entirely unwarranted, for it was from the ranks of the educated elite that the nationalist movement fighting for independence emerged. First the student movement (such as the Nigerian Union of Students and the more broadly defined West African Students' Union, WASU) and later the political parties (such as the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons, NCNC, and the Action Group) were led and sustained by that elite.³⁷ Perhaps no other Nigerian typifies better this process of initial fascination followed by eventual indignation at the inequities of colonial rule than Nnamdi Azikiwe, the pioneer of the Nigerian nationalist movement. His pursuit of education had taken him across the seas to the United States, where he had to support himself by being employed in various odd jobs ranging from that of a dishwasher to a sparring partner for a boxer as he attained various academic qualifications.³⁸

In Ghana, or the Gold Coast as it was known before independence, the

³³ A. Adu Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (1985): 63–93.

³⁴ David B. Abernethy, *The Political Dilemma of Popular Education: An African Case* (1969): 15.

³⁵ Lilyan Kesteloot, *Intellectual Origins of the African Revolution* (1968).

³⁶ Hugh H. Smythe, 'The Educational Foundation of Nigerian Politicians', in Hans N. Weiler, ed., *Erziehung und Politik in Nigeria. Education and Politics in Nigeria* (1964): 155.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 156, 158; Abernethy: 118–21; Helmuth Peets, 'The Role of Education in British Colonial Policy in Nigeria', in Weiler, ed.: 108–9; James S. Coleman, *Nigeria. Background to Revolution* (1960): 204–7, 239–43.

³⁸ Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Renascent Africa* (1969); Smythe, 'The Educational Foundation': 176.

contradictions between the traditional rulers and the educated elite was reportedly even more acute than elsewhere in British Africa. Higher education, which was a rare phenomenon under colonial rule, had a long ancestry there, going back to the establishment of the Fourah Bay College in the first half of the nineteenth century. Denied access to senior administrative posts, most of its graduates opted for private practice in law and the medical profession. But already at that stage there was some articulation of political demands, as evidenced in the establishment of the short-lived Fanti Confederation in 1868 and the Aborigines Rights Protection Society, set up to oppose the alienation of African land to European companies, in 1897.³⁹ In the twentieth century the connection between Western education and political militancy became even more clearly articulated, producing perhaps the most charismatic and influential African nationalist leader of the 1950s and 1960s, Kwame Nkrumah.

In francophone and lusophone Africa, the process of acculturation attained such a level that it produced veritable black Portuguese or black French. This process of *déracinement* (uprooting) was eloquently articulated by Léopold Sédar Senghor, the Senegalese poet and president, in the following manner:

with docility we accepted the values of the West: its discursive reason and its techniques ... Our ambition was to become photographic negatives of the colonizers; 'black-skinned Frenchmen'. It went even further, for we would have blushed, if we could have blushed, about our black skin, our frizzled hair, our flat noses, above all for the values of our traditional civilization ... Our people ... caused us shame.⁴⁰

Yet, despite this gallicization process, there always remained a line which the blacks could not cross. Even if and when that line could be crossed, the loss of the original identity bred resentment. And thus was born a vigorous negation of white culture and an equally powerful reaffirmation of blackness.

Such a reaction had already manifested itself among a group of Africans who had gone through a similar process of assimilation before, the creoles. The creoles of Sierra Leone, who had been considered as 'black English' until about the middle of the nineteenth century, made a dramatic return to their African roots, searching for African names and African dresses.⁴¹ Their quest for their roots in Pharaonic Egypt seems a forerunner of the more recent African-American search for similar roots. Another group of freed slaves, who came to be known as the Yoruba creoles, made a much more successful identification with their roots by reintegrating into Yoruba life. One of them, Samuel Johnson, attained lasting fame with his *History of the Yorubas*.⁴²

But it was with the francophone Africans and Caribbeans that the

³⁹ Phillip Foster, *Education and Social Change in Ghana* (1965): 93–6.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Jacques Louis Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor. An Intellectual History* (1971): 16.

⁴¹ Leo Spitzer, 'The Sierra Leone Creoles, 1870–1900', in Curtin, ed., *Africa and the West*: 100–19.

⁴² Jean Herskovits, 'The Sierra Leoneans of Yorubaland', in *ibid.*

reassertion of black values and black personality attained its peak. This movement first crystallized in the interwar period around a journal dedicated to the fostering of black culture, *Revue du Monde Noir*. Cultural liberation, it was argued, was a precondition for political liberation. After the second world war, under the patronage of such celebrities as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, André Gide and Michel Leiris, the even more influential and durable journal of black culture, *Présence Africaine*, was born.⁴³ The views of these powerful intellectuals ranged from the gentle poetry of Aimé Césaire to the revolutionary tracts of Frantz Fanon, both from the French Caribbean. In Africa Senghor emerged as the eloquent spokesman of the movement. And the reaffirmation of black dignity and black values, which Senghor strove to convey through his preferred medium of poetry, came to be known as *négritude*.

In the academic sphere, Senghor's compatriot, Cheikh Anta Diop, asserted the antiquity and precedence of African civilization, assertions whose echoes are being felt to this day, notably through some of his ardent followers and admirers like the Ethiopian poet laureate, Tsegaye Gebre Medhin. Diop's mission was essentially to counter the balkanization and cultural negation of Africa with the assertion of its continental unity and its primacy in the history of the world as the cradle of mankind and the ultimate origin, through Pharaonic Egypt, of Greco-Roman civilization.⁴⁴

In lusophone Africa, a black cultural movement began to appear in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Cape Verde and Mozambique. The Cape Verdean journal, *Claridade*, served as an important forum for that movement. One of these intellectuals who rediscovered their African heritage was Amílcar Cabral, the leader of the independence movement of Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands. Dissatisfied with the orthodox Marxist-Leninist interpretation of the African condition, Cabral and his fellow students in Lisbon turned to what they termed as the 're-Africanization of the spirit'. They launched a journal known as *Mensagem*, equivalent to the francophone *Présence Africaine*. Cabral was soon joined by other future leaders of the independence movement in Portuguese Africa, Marcelino dos Santos of Mozambique and Agostino Neto of Angola. It was this cultural awareness that the leaders eventually translated into political action characterized by large-scale mobilization of the masses.⁴⁵

In southern Africa, reaction to the cultural hegemony of the West assumed a religious character. Religious separatist movements sprang up in South Africa and the British colonies of Nyasaland (Malawi) and Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). Because of their identification with biblical Ethiopia and, subsequent to the Adwa victory, with historical Ethiopia, these movements came to be called Ethiopianist. They also drew their inspiration from the independent black churches of the United States,

⁴³ Hymans, Chaps 8 and 21.

⁴⁴ Mamadou Diouf, 'Des historiens et des histoires, pourquoi faire? L'historiographie africaine entre l'Etat et les Communautés', mimeo, n.d.: 14-17.

⁴⁵ Patrick Chabal, *Amílcar Cabral, Revolutionary Leadership and People's War* (1983): 32-46.

which had had a long history of the assertion of black identity through the religious medium. The most famous of these religious movements in southern Africa was the one in Nyasaland led by John Chilembwe. It culminated in an uprising in 1915, which was crushed after briefly causing terror among the white settler community.⁴⁶

Such, in brief, was the global and continental framework within which Ethiopian intellectual history unfolded. A full account of that history, whose repercussions are still far from over, would require volumes. The scope of this particular study is limited to an examination of the careers, the ideas and the social and political impact of a group of intellectuals who were active in the first four decades of the twentieth century. Few other groups of Ethiopian intellectuals articulated their ideas with as much clarity and coherence as these pioneers. Although a number of studies have been done on these intellectuals individually, fewer efforts have been made to study them as a group. This is what is attempted here. Before we proceed to investigate the group in depth, however, it would be of some value to depict the Ethiopian intellectual background and identify the antecedents of the characters of this study.

Ethiopian antecedents

Ethiopia's conversion to Christianity in the fourth century AD determined the course of the country's history in more ways than one. While Aksum had had strong and sustained links with the Mediterranean world even in pre-Christian times, the introduction of Christianity gave those relations a new and more sharpened focus, tying the country through religious bonds with Egypt in particular and the eastern Mediterranean in general. One way in which interaction between Ethiopia and the Levant increased was through the pilgrimages that Ethiopian Christians came to make to Jerusalem after the country's conversion to Christianity. Centres of pilgrimage, whether it be Jerusalem or Mecca, have been important in history not only as sites for the expression of religious devotion but also as venues for the exchange of goods and ideas, with considerable impact on economy and society.

Contacts between Christian Ethiopia and the eastern Mediterranean reached a high point in the beginning of the second millennium of our era. The Zagwé period (c. 1150–1270), which is generally portrayed to have been a rather insular period of Ethiopian history, actually saw the most enduring manifestation of these contacts. The monolithic churches of Lalibāla, for which that period is so famous, were laid out in a manner designed to reproduce the Holy City in central Ethiopia. Not only did the

⁴⁶ Robert I. Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa. The Making of Malawi and Zambia, 1873–1964* (1965): 56–8, 85–92; George Shepperson and Thomas Price, *Independent African. John Chilembwe and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915* (1958).

number of Ethiopian pilgrims to Jerusalem increase but the Ethiopian community was also given the Der Sultan monastery by the Muslim victor in the Crusades, Saladin.⁴⁷

It was also probably the presence of this Ethiopian community in Jerusalem that gave rise to or nourished the famous story of Prester John, which set the context for Ethiopia's relations with Europe in the first half of the second millennium. The pilgrims not only filtered to Europe information about the mighty kings of medieval Ethiopia that gave flesh and blood to the initially rather hazy perception of Prester John but also encouraged closer contacts with Christian Europe in order to bring Ethiopia out of the isolation that Fatimid and Mamluk Egypt had placed it in.⁴⁸

Interaction with the Levant also appears to have been instrumental in the flowering of the *Éwostatéwos* movement in the fourteenth century. *Éwostatéwos* was a monk of *Sārayé* whose divergence from the religious establishment on the question of observing the Sabbath (he being for it) and the attendant persecutions that he suffered forced him and his followers into exile. This period of exile fortified the *Éwostatéwos* party both intellectually and organizationally. As Tadesse Tamrat writes:

During their sojourn in the Levant they probably had much access to the literature of the early Christian Church, and they may have brought their own copies of religious books back with them. The traditions of great love for books which we have about the leading members of the movement probably arise from this. An active literary development appears to have taken place among them during this period, and not only did it strengthen their own position but also seems to have served in time as a decisive landmark in the cultural renaissance of the whole of the Ethiopian Church.⁴⁹

The outcome of this organizational and intellectual strength of the *Éwostatéans* was that they came to have their position on the Sabbath accepted by Emperor *Zāra Ya'eqob*, who appreciated the inherently nationalist content of the *Éwostatéan* stand vis-a-vis the Egyptian metropolitan.

An even more vibrant Ethiopian community came to be established in Rome, inside the Vatican, in the sixteenth century. Their convent, known as the 'San Stefano degli Abissini', evolved into an important centre for the study of Ethiopian history and languages, hosting such famous scholars as Abba Gorgoryos, on whom the German scholar Hiob Ludolf relied so heavily in writing his *History of Ethiopia*. A couple of centuries later, another Ethiopian scholar, *Däbtära Keflä-Giyorgis*, played an equally crucial role as teacher of the person who could be described as the father of Ethiopian studies in Italy, Ignazio Guidi.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Tadesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia* (1972): 57–8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: 251–3, 256–7.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*: 209–10.

⁵⁰ Aleme Eshete, 'Bäqädmo Zāmānat Kä1889 Bäfit Wech Agär Yätāmaru Ityopyawyanoch Tarik', *EJE* (1973): 115–19.

The coming of the Jesuits in the sixteenth century represented another important chapter in Ethiopia's interaction with the West. The Jesuits set themselves up at Frémona, near the town of Adwa, which became their main centre for the propagation of Catholicism. Not much seems to be known about the Ethiopian converts to Catholicism, except of course for the Emperor Susenyos and his brother and viceroy in Gojjam, *Ras* Se'elä Krestos. We know, however, that one of the converts, Fequrä-Egzi by name, was designated as the emperor's envoy to Europe. He left in the company of one of the Jesuit priests, Father Antonio Fernandes, but, after a rather perilous journey across southern Ethiopia, they had to retrace their steps back to the north, their mission aborted.⁵¹

Possibly as a result of the interaction between the Orthodox tradition and the Jesuit challenge, there arose in the seventeenth century the rather unusual philosopher by the name of Zära Ya'eqob of Aksum, and his disciple Wäldä Heywät of Enfraz. They wrote two treatises which, in their rationalism and originality, stand out in solitary splendour, for they had neither antecedents nor immediate sequel. Partly because of this fact, Conti Rossini has challenged the authorship of Zära Ya'eqob's treatise, attributing the work to the nineteenth-century Italian Capuchin missionary, Giusto d'Urbino. Tamrat Ammanuél, one of the intellectuals whose career is discussed below, also concurred with this conclusion.⁵² But Claude Sumner has disputed this contention and devoted a great deal of research to showing the Ethiopian character of the two philosophers.⁵³

For nearly two centuries after the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1632, Ethiopia lived in almost absolute isolation from Europe. This period came to an end at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as Europe rediscovered Ethiopia and the rest of Africa under the triple banner of commerce, evangelism and exploration. The Protestants, more specifically the Church Missionary Society (CMS) based in England and Switzerland (Basel), pioneered missionary activity in Ethiopia. Evangelism, as so often, was attended by the provision of Western education, be it by establishing schools in Ethiopia or by sending the young converts abroad.

Among such beneficiaries of Western education, some of whom later came to occupy important positions as secretaries and interpreters to Ethiopian monarchs, were Berru Pétros, Mahdärä-Qal Täwäldä-Mädhen and Mercha Wärqé. Berru, more commonly known as Berru Wälqayté because of his place of origin in northwestern Ethiopia, first went to Jerusalem in the 1840s at the age of 18. In 1852 he was sent by Samuel Gobat, who had pioneered CMS missionary activity in Ethiopia in the 1830s and was bishop of Jerusalem at the time, to the CMS college on the

⁵¹ C.F. Beckingham and G.W.B. Huntingford, *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646* (1954): xxxviii, 143ff.

⁵² *BS*, 9.11.13.

⁵³ See his *Ethiopian Philosophy*, Vol. II (1976). Sumner argues that the fact that doubt is cast only on Zära Ya'eqob's treatise and not on the complementary and equally significant one of Wäldä-Heywät makes Conti Rossini's assertions questionable. *Ibid.*: 74, citing I. Kraçkovskii.

island of Malta.⁵⁴ Through his uncle, *Däbtära* Tawäldä-Mädhen, Berru came to know Antoine d'Abbadie, the great French traveller and scholar of the nineteenth century; Tawäldä-Mädhen himself had apparently once accompanied Antoine from Gondär to Jerusalem.⁵⁵ And it was to Antoine that Berru confided his experiences: the subjects that he studied (English, Latin, Arabic, French, world history, physical geography and – his favourite – the Bible),⁵⁶ his dislike for the British ('those arrogant discriminators')⁵⁷ and his squabbles with another Ethiopian student at the college, Mahdärä-Qal.⁵⁸ His correspondence also revealed how he had to steer carefully between Protestantism, the religion of his sponsors, and Catholicism, that of his confidant Antoine d'Abbadie. After completing his studies, he started to work as an employee of the Egyptian Telegraph Office in Cairo, then moved into business (mainly importing arms), and ended up as agent ('consul') of Emperor Yohannes at Massawa. As we will see below, one of his sons, Mikael Berru, was to attain prominence as the official interpreter of the British legation in the early twentieth century.⁵⁹

Mahdärä-Qal, a native of Adyabo in modern northwestern Tegray, had come to Malta after three years in France, where he had gone in 1843 in the company of another French traveller, Théophile Lefebvre. In Malta, Mahdärä-Qal apparently acquired sufficient mastery of the English language to correspond at length with his British patron.⁶⁰ This proficiency in English was shared by the third product of missionary education, Mercha Wärqé.

Mercha came from a family in Adwa with a long history of contacts with foreigners, first with Armenians (his paternal grandfather was in fact an Armenian trader),⁶¹ then with the British (William Coffin, who had accompanied Henry Salt in 1810 and resided in Tegré for three decades, was his brother-in-law). Mercha and his brother Gäbru were sent to Bombay in 1837 and returned in 1849. They are said to have opened a school in their native town, and Mercha eventually rose to become successively secretary and interpreter of Emperors Téwodros and Yohannes.⁶²

⁵⁴ Samuel Gobat, *Journal of a Three Years' Residence in Abyssinia in Furtherance of the Objects of the Church Missionary Society* (1834).

⁵⁵ Sven Rubenson, ed., *Acta Æthiopica. Volume I. Correspondence and Treaties 1800–1854* (1987): 164, 177, 232.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: 233.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 244

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: 246.

⁵⁹ Aleme, 'Bäqädmo Zämānat', pp. 125–34; see pp. 184–5 for Mikael Berru.

⁶⁰ Rubenson, *Acta*, I: 250–1; Aleme, 'Bäqädmo Zämānat', p. 119.

⁶¹ According to Rubenson, *Acta*, I: 117. Aleme ('Bäqädmo Zämānat', pp. 124–5) claims, however, that it was Mercha's father who was an Armenian and had adopted the Ethiopian name of Wärqé. Johann Martin Flad writes, on the other hand, that Wärqé was 'einen geborenen Armenier' (Armenian by birth): *60 Jahre in der Mission unter den Falaschas in Abessinien* (1922): 52. Wärqé had once served Subagadis, the Tegréan ruler, as envoy to Egypt: Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopian Independence* (1976): 61–2.

⁶² Rubenson, *Acta*, I: 116–17; Flad: 52.

The rise of Têwodros in the 1850s seems to have provided all three – Berru, Mercha and Mahdärä-Qal – with the first opportunity to put the language skills they had acquired abroad in the service of the state. Their training came to be an asset at a time when there was so much interaction with foreigners; they served as secretaries, translators, interpreters and envoys.⁶³ Mercha was in fact elevated to the title of *liqä mäkwäs* and is described by Sven Rubenson as ‘probably Kasa’s [i.e. Yohannes’s] most important adviser on foreign affairs’.⁶⁴ He mediated between Kasa and the Napier expedition in 1867–8 and represented Emperor Yohannes in the negotiations with the Egyptians after their second military defeat at Gura in 1876.⁶⁵ It was Berru and another translator, Samuél Giyorgis, who translated for Têwodros the uncomplimentary remarks about the emperor in the writings of the missionaries Stern and Rosenthal.⁶⁶ In an act of furious retribution, as is common knowledge, Têwodros imprisoned the missionaries along with others and thereby invited British intervention. Mahdärä-Qal appears to have been Yohannes’s chief translator, sometimes even taking the liberty of adding his own words in the emperor’s correspondence with the Europeans.⁶⁷

In the nineteenth century, perhaps no group of people was the target of missionary activity as much as the Fälasha were. It was as if there was a tacit agreement between Ethiopian rulers and European missionaries that the labours of the latter could be directed to mutual advantage towards the recalcitrant Fälasha rather than the Orthodox Christians. Consequently, Fälasha youth also came to be among the first beneficiaries of Western education. Four of them, Haylu Wäsän, Mikaél Arägawi (who was actually of a Christian family) and the brothers Samani and Sänbätu Daniél were sent to the Chrischona mission in Switzerland around 1869. Haylu perished under the inclement European weather and the survivors returned to Ethiopia in 1873. They set up a thriving mission in Azäzo, in the outskirts of Gondär, where they were able to convert a number of their countrymen.⁶⁸

Worthy of note here, and with a significant bearing on our discussion of the twentieth-century situation, is the fact that it was not only the foreign-educated who acted as a medium between the Europeans, missionary and lay, and Ethiopians, high or low. The Ethiopian church education has produced the *däbtära*, combining traditional learning and an unusually canny appreciation of changing circumstances and a capacity to adjust their steps accordingly. The missionaries registered some of their most successful conversions among this sector of the Ethiopian clergy. The most famous of them was probably *Däbtära Zänäb*, the chronicler of Emperor Têwodros. The German missionary Johann Martin Flad cites at least three others:

⁶³ Rubenson, *Survival*: 284.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: 281.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: 280, 330.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*: 233.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*: 304, 324.

⁶⁸ Flad: 265, 311–36, 342–3; James Quirin, *The Evolution of the Ethiopian Jews. A History of the Beta Israel (Fälasha) to 1920* (1992): 183–4.

Wäldä-Sellasé, Berru Webé and Alámé. The first of these was sent to the Chrischona mission in Switzerland; the second was among the first and the most important of Flad's converts among the Fälasha.⁶⁹

The arrival of the Italians and their determined quest for territory inevitably required the service of interpreters. Among the first picked by them was Pétros Giyorgis. Unfortunately for them, however, Pétros, who used to call himself 'Pétros the Ethiopian' and thoroughly lived up to the designation, proved more an enemy than an aid. He kept secret contacts with both Emperor Yohannes and his governor of the Mārāb Mellash, *Ras* Alula, and apprised them of Italian intentions and plans. One could in fact sense the influence of Pétros in some of the forceful remarks that Alula made to the British emissary, Sir Gerald Portal, during his visit in the wake of the Italian disaster at Dogali in January 1887.⁷⁰

A letter that Pétros wrote to Alula on 18 January 1887, eight days before the battle of Dogali, was to all intents and purposes a passionate call to arms:

ታሪክ አላነበቡም ይሆናል እ[ን]ጅ ፈረንጅና ቀንቁን አንድ ነው ቀንቁን ከትል
ሁሉ ያንግል ነገር ግን ታላቁን ግንድ በልቶ አድርቆ ይጥሰዋል እነዚህም
መጀመሪያ በግንድ ስም ይመጡና ጥቂት በጥቂት አየሱ የሰውን አገር
ይወርግሉ ስለዚህ አሁን ተሎ ደብድቧቸው ይሰቱ ለሰዚያ አገርም መጥፋቱ
ነው ... ዛሬ ግድግ በአገር ጣት ይነጫል ካደገ በኋላ ግን ብዙ መጋዘና
መጥሪያ ያስፈልገዋል እንደዚሁም ራግልገል ክንፋ ግድግ የኛ ዓመት
ልጅ ከዛና አውርዶ ሲጫወትበት ይውላል፣ ክንፋ ካደገ በኋላ ግን ከሰው
እጅ ሥጋ ነጥቆ እስከ አየር ይወጣልና የግራያገኛው የሰም እ[ን]ደዚሁም
እነዚህ ናቸውና ለአገርም ለግዛትም ለጠጅቻ ለሙግም ከሁሉም ይልቅ ስታላቅ
ክብርም ይሞክሩ

You may not have read history. But the *fārānj* [i.e. Europeans] are like an earworm. Earworm is the smallest of worms. But it will eat up and destroy the largest of trees. Likewise, the *fārānj* first come in the name of trade; gradually, they end up taking over the country. So, hit them now, wipe them out, or else your country is lost ... You can move a sapling with your toe; but once it is grown, it will require many axes and saws. Likewise, a six-year old kid can play with a baby crow. But, once its wings are grown, it will snatch lumps of meat from a man's hand and fly to the air ... Therefore, defend your country, your province, your privileges, above all your honour.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Flad: 198, 264, 319; Quirin, *Ethiopian Jews*: 183.
⁷⁰ Gerald Portal, *An Account of the English Mission to King Johannis of Abyssinia in 1887* (n.d.): 38–39.
⁷¹ *Alāqa* Tayyā papers, National Library (Language Academy). The letter is found in a biography of Pétros and *Blatta Gābrā-Egziabher* compiled by *Alāqa* Kidanā-Maryam, a copy of which is found with the papers of *Alāqa* Tayyā. The manuscript has the Ethiopian year 1880 (i.e. 1888) throughout the narrative. But, from the context, it is obvious that it means 1879EC.

The Italians uncovered his secret dealings with Alula and, after confiscating his goods, sent him back to Alexandria, from where they had apparently picked him in the first place. Using as leverage the Italian hostages he had with him, Alula forced the Italian command at Massawa to restore to Pétros his property; such was his spite for the Italians that he put in a claim for threefold the actual value of the goods confiscated by the Italians.⁷²

Menilek too had the service of Ethiopian interpreters in his relations with Europeans, particularly the Italians, with whom he had some rather sticky points to settle. Notable among these interpreters were the two Yoséfs: *Grazmach* Yoséf Negusé, the famous translator of the Treaty of Wechalé, and his namesake Yoséf ZäGalan. The latter, along with nine other young Ethiopians, had been sent by the Italian missionary Guglielmo Massaja to the Capuchin college in Marseilles around 1873. He subsequently revisited Europe on commercial and official missions and later represented Menilek at Djibouti. He is reputed to have been decorated with the French ‘Légion d’honneur’ in 1916.⁷³

Another person who was to be closely associated with Menilek as adviser and intermediary with foreigners was Mäshäsha Wärqé, grandson of the Mercha Wärqé mentioned above. Earlier, he had apparently been in the service of Yohannes. In one of his many letters to *Ras* Dargé, Menilek’s uncle, in late 1888 when relations between the emperor and his vassal were at their worst, Yohannes placed particular blame on the machinations of Mäshäsha. ‘This is all the work of Mäshäsha Wärqé,’ the emperor writes in frustration, ‘who, having studied all the languages of the world, is now busy learning the devil’s tongue.’⁷⁴ Mäshäsha fell into disgrace after being involved in a plot against Menilek in 1892.⁷⁵ But, in the last years of Menilek’s reign, he re-emerged into the limelight to head official missions to the Middle East (in 1903 and 1905) and to Austria and Germany (in 1907).⁷⁶

⁷² *Ibid.*; see Aleme Eshete, ‘The Role and Position of Foreign-educated Interpreters in Ethiopia (1800–1889)’, *JES* (1973): 23–4.

⁷³ Heruy Wäldä-Sellasé, *YäHeywät Tarik (Biographie)* (1915EC): 84; MAE, GUERRE 1914–1918, Renseignements, 2.10.16; Aleme, ‘Bäqädmo Zämānat’: 121.

⁷⁴ Heruy Wäldä-Sellasé, *Yälyotyä Tarik* (c. 1928EC): 81.

⁷⁵ Harold Marcus, *Life and Times of Menelik II. Ethiopia 1844–1913* (1975): 144–5.

⁷⁶ FO 371/192, General Report, 10.4.07; Hohler to Grey, 14.6.07.