

The Ethiopian Student Movement in the Struggle against Imperialism, 1960-1974^{*}

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Paper presented to the Annual Social Science Conference of the East African Universities (12th: Dar es Salaam: 20-22 December 1976)

INTRODUCTION

Until 1974 radical commentators did not generally regard Ethiopia as an important arena in the struggle against repression, backwardness and neo-colonialism. For one thing, the old regime was very successful at projecting a progressive image abroad. The Emperor's self-assumed role as heroic resister against Fascism, supporter of liberation movements, patron of the OAU and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, and benevolent ruler of his people was shown to have been an anomaly only by the popular revolt of 1974. The attempted cover-up of the famine in Wollo Province at a time when the old regime was prepared to spend millions of Ethiopian dollars on the showcase celebrations of the OAU's tenth anniversary revealed the bankruptcy of the Ethiopian political system to the world, and contributed to the overthrow of the imperial Ethiopian government in a step-by-step army coup that lasted from February to September. The degeneracy of the Ethiopian land-owning and capitalist class was so advanced that the Provisional Military Administrative Council (the *Dergue*) was able to edge Haile Sellassie from his throne with startling ease, and with virtually no organised opposition. Much of the credit for the anti-monarchic and anti-feudal popular mood that made this coup possible must go to the Ethiopian student movement, which had been in the vanguard of the struggle for a progressive Ethiopia for fifteen years.

This text does not attempt to discuss the role of the student movement in the period after 1974. Rather, it tries to provide an historical framework for a discussion of the impact of student militancy and the reasons for its survival, vigour and sophistication in the context of Haile Sellassie's Ethiopia.

After the defeat of the Italians and the restoration, by the British, of Haile Sellassie to the throne in 1941, the Emperor continued the work of creating the bureaucratic machinery of a centralised modern state. He destroyed the *independent* political and military power of the feudal aristocracy, who were to take over the role of a new ruling class, under the autocracy, in the new political order. In the late 1940s Ethiopia was the scene of a struggle for dominance between Britain, which administered the country until the end of the war in Europe, and the United States. Although Haile Sellassie to some extent played off the two imperialist powers against each other, he simultaneously permitted and participated in the invasion of the Ethiopian economy by the most rapacious elements of international capitalism. In alliance with these elements, the feudal aristocracy was given huge tracts of land and complete freedom to plunder the peasantry, particularly through the enormous private land-holdings of the south. In some areas the landlords took as much as three quarters of their tenants' harvest in cash or kind, through a complex system of taxes, tithes and tribute. Tenants were also saddled with obligations to provide their labour for the

landlord's benefit.

By integrating Ethiopia into the world capitalist system, the ruling elite hoped to provide stability for their own continued enrichment. Although few in number, the ruling class concentrated enormous resources in their hands. In the Addis Ababa area, for instance, over eighty percent of all urban land was in private ownership, and particularly in the control of about twenty noble families. It was the same in the countryside. Between them, the royal family and the nobility on the one hand, and the Orthodox Church on the other owned perhaps eighty-five percent of the land under cultivation, in a proportion of sixty-five percent to twenty percent. Four large corporations—the St. George Brewery, the Anbassa Bus Company, the Haile Sellassie I Prize Trust, and the Natural Resources Development Corporation—brought in further millions for the handful of noble families who controlled them.^[1] From time to time, scandals revealed the cynicism with which the ruling class operated the system for their own benefit. For instance, the Ethiopian National Corporation (ENC), a monopoly for cereals export, was established in 1943 by the then Minister of Agriculture, the Vice-Minister of Finance, the Emperor and the Empress. Within a year, the corporation also had a monopoly in sugar distribution and a near-monopoly in cotton. The same officials who had set up the corporation also controlled a black market operation that they used to release goods held up by the corporation, in order to create and then satisfy artificial shortages. By 1945 the profits of the corporation exceeded thirty percent of the government's total revenue. A committee of enquiry was set up. Chaired by the Vice-Minister of Finance, it exonerated the ENC completely of any wrongdoing.

The formation of the proletariat remained at an embryonic stage, although the Ethiopian trade union movement had been active since the 1940s with a few isolated strike actions. The only type of union permitted by the imperial Ethiopian government (IEG) was limited to one factory or company, a divisive tactic that emasculated the union movement and prevented effective struggle by workers on economic issues. In such circumstances as these, there was no effective means of preventing a ruling elite from hanging on to power indefinitely. The tiny and divided proletariat could be controlled easily, and the vast majority of the peasantry was disorganised and at a low level of political consciousness. Table I (following page) shows estimated working population distribution by sector in 1968, approximately halfway through the period under discussion.

The Ethiopian economy was essentially traditional and rural, and agricultural production constituted about seventy percent of GNP. Agricultural technology remained extremely primitive, and during most of the period under discussion the overall growth rate had been seriously retarded by the stagnation of the agricultural sector. Between 1961 and 1965, for example, the average annual growth rate of per capita production in agriculture was only 0,5 percent. Industrial production registered a 16 percent growth rate in the same period. But none of the major sectors of industry was home based. Such uneven development is characteristic of vertically integrated economies, producing consumer goods and semi-manufactures for export. The sluggishness of the economy as a whole could not be disguised by the artificially stimulated growth of relatively minor sectors. Nor were the IEG's gestures in the direction of central planning anything more than an expression of hope or intention. Lacking the means and the will to impose central control and direction on the economy, the government ignored the main area of concern, the chaotic agricultural situation. Essential land reform was proposed, discussed, discussed again, and forgotten. The eventual result was a famine that killed thousands and together with the global oil-price crisis toppled the *ancien régime*.

Economic Sector	Active Population	Percentage
Agriculture	6.358.100	86,70
Mining	6.500	0,09
Manufacturing (including small-scale production)	400.000	5,39
Construction	107.000	1,44
Electricity, gas, water	3.000	0,04
Commerce	94.100	1,27
Transport and communication	31.900	0,43
Services	418.600	5,64

Even in Addis Ababa, where the national university^[3] is located, the formation of a proletariat was taking place only slowly and erratically. A citywide survey conducted in 1960, at the beginning of the period under review, showed that 29 percent of the households sampled relied wholly or partly on income brought in from the rural areas, excluding food. Of these households only 41 percent lived on the income from wage labour. The remainder subsisted on income from property or businesses.

The average per capita income of those living in the city was low. Table II shows that the disparity between high-income groups and low income groups in 1960 was extreme.

Monthly Income (Ethiopian dollars)	Percentage of Sample Households	
Below E\$ 2,50	3	(n=20)
E\$2,50— 5,00	8	(n=48)
E\$6,00—15,00	34	(n=196)
E\$16,00—30,00	26	(n=151)
E\$31,00—50,00	18	(n=106)
E\$51,00—100,00	8	(n=48)
Above E\$100,00	3	(n=19)

THE FORMATION OF THE INTELLECTUAL ELITE

The attitude of the ruling elite towards education was extremely ambivalent. In the 1950s and even into the 1960s the “politicians” of Ethiopia were predominantly non-westernised, many of them having risen through the traditional court system in which military bravery, family ties, and demonstrated ability to work within the system were the qualifications required. These traditionalists were often suspicious of the intellectual elite, which was being created on the western model in order to increase the operational efficiency of the bureaucratic machine. There was, therefore, a contradiction within the elite between the technocrats and the entrenched feudal ruling class, which was itself far from homogenous. This situation did not exist in such an extreme form elsewhere in Africa, because of the presence of the colonial powers. In most former colonial territories the intelligentsia had been forged in the national liberation struggle against the metropole. But in Ethiopia this kind of politics was virtually unknown—there were no parties, no rallies, no public discussions—and even the tame parliamentary debates were held *in camera camera*, with no published record. The political activities of high school and university students thus

challenged the regime on at least three levels—culturally, because of the powerful Amhara tradition of respect for one’s elders; structurally, because there was no framework in which any political debate could possibly be conducted; and politically, because the critique mounted by the students against the regime was increasingly sophisticated and concrete, and eventually, unanswerable.

The educational system was small in scale, although in all sectors it was expanding rapidly throughout the post-war decades. In 1965, when the population of Ethiopia was estimated at between 21 and 28 millions, there were just under 350,000 learners in primary schools out of a school-age population of perhaps 3,375,000. In the same year secondary school enrolment was only 48,653. Despite Ethiopia’s nominal adherence to the Africa Education Plan, drawn up in 1963 at the Addis Ababa Conference, the educational system developed very unevenly. The Plan advocated universal primary education, and 20 percent of the age group in secondary schools. But in fact the Ethiopian secondary and post-secondary sectors maintained a higher growth rate than primary education:

	Percentage Enrolment Increase		
	Primary	Secondary	Post-Secondary
1955/56—1960/61	72,7	194,0	233,0
1961/62—1966/67	87,5	69,6	222,0
1967/68—1972/73	64,5	129,0	100,0

Although recent statistics omit pupils studying in the traditional Orthodox Church schools, there is little reason to suppose that these schools had more than 400,000 students at most. In addition, the education offered was poor in quality and extremely stereotyped. In 1971-1972 the total number of pupils *in all types of secondary school*—government, missionary, Orthodox Church, or private—was still only 140,691, of whom about 80,000 were in junior secondary schools (grades 7-8).

Despite the very small number of secondary school students, two factors made them politically more effective than might otherwise have been the case. Secondary education was concentrated in larger towns—in 1971, Addis Ababa had ten government schools with 15,000 pupils. Second, the average Ethiopian secondary school student was considerably older than her or his Western counterpart. Senior students might be in their early twenties, even as old as 26. Juniors might be older teenagers. Often they lived on their wits in the city in order to continue their education. There was no uniform or standard form of dress (as in Kenya or Tanzania for example) to distinguish high school students from the rest of the population. They could interact on equal or near-equal terms with university students or with young workers. In the late 1960s the high school students organised a nation-wide network of student councils in nearly every school. Each classroom sent a representative to the student council; a council of councils at the national level topped the pyramid. Given this level of organisation, the concentration of high schools in the towns, and the maturity of the mass of students, they constituted a real threat to urban stability.

ALIENATION AMONG ETHIOPIAN STUDENTS

Despite its ambivalence towards such western concepts of education itself, academic freedom, and the liberal and radical social critiques, the Ethiopian ruling class initiated and sustained a massive expansion of higher education throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. The relationship between the government—which needed high-level human resources—and university graduates—who needed jobs—was essentially symbiotic. The contradiction between the IEG’s actions and its policies could not and did not go unnoticed by student leaders. In 1974 the president of the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) stated in an interview

“We have made it clear over the past nine or ten years that one of the basic aims of the Ethiopian

students' movement is to sharpen the contradiction between the exploiting and the exploited classes."

The reason why it was possible to mobilise mass student support for a radical critique of the old social system can be sought in the nature and growth of the national university itself, as well as in its position in Ethiopian society.

Intellectual labour in Ethiopia was subordinated to the human resource needs of a social system that was both degenerate and viciously exploitative. There was virtually no attempt to adapt the system to the individual's needs or talents. Instead, the worker had to adapt to her work, the student to his university. The resulting wastage of human resources was considerable. The attrition rate in some years was as high as forty percent of the intake. Table IV below shows the relentless expansion of the national university from 1961 to 1973.

At the beginning of this period, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Ethiopian students were not especially restless. Their union was effectively run for them by the university administration. Although there was some anger and frustration at the conformism and paternalism of the administration, protest was stifled by the weight of authority brought to bear by the Emperor, the IEG, the Orthodox Church, and even the students' own parents. The university community was small and tightly knit. The background of family and ethnic rivalries together with the presence of government spies prevented all but the most courageous students from risking their education, their future and perhaps even their lives in political protest. Nor indeed was it possible—in Ethiopia or anywhere else—for a student revolt to usurp the role of the working class or to do more than detonate rebellion in broader layers of society.

Academic Year	Total Enrolment	Growth Index (1961/62 base year)
1961/62	1,974	100
1962/63	2,497	126
1963/64	2,972	150
1964/65	3,302	167
1965/66	4,091	207
1966/67	4,578	232
1967/68	5,168	262
1968/69	6,432	325
1969/70	6,897	349
1970/71	6,764	342
1971/72	7,762	393
1972/73	7,234	366

Several factors were crucial to the transformation of this situation from one of relative passivity to one of active opposition. First, of course, were the Neway brothers' coup in December 1960, Haile Sellassie's counter-coup, and the bloody aftermath—all of which made a profound impact on the consciousness of the students. The unthinkable had been attempted, and for a few days had been achieved. For the next fourteen years, the example of the Neway brothers was at the back of every Ethiopian radical's mind. Second, in September 1961, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) began full-scale operations against the central government. It was a powerful expression of the centrifugal tendencies of the Ethiopian empire, tendencies that student leaders have exploited whenever necessary.

There was another important catalyst, on a smaller and more parochial level. At the Accra Conference of Independent African States in 1958, Haile Sellassie offered several scholarships for students from other

African countries to attend University College Addis Ababa. The same year fifteen such students arrived, and by academic year 1960/1961 there were 27 non-Ethiopian Africans in a total enrolment of 381. Three years later the number of scholarship holders had doubled. Most were from east African countries, with a few from west and southern Africa. These students came from highly politicised societies, in which the national liberation struggle had reached or was about to reach its climax. Their leaders—Nkrumah, Senghor, Sékou Touré and Nyerere—were the intellectual vanguard of the continent, poets and philosophers. They found Ethiopia, with its proud tradition of independence and resistance to colonialism, not only appallingly backward and poverty-stricken, but politically apathetic as well. The local students—the future leaders of Ethiopia—did not even consider themselves African. They did not read the writings of African statesmen and politicians. They were unconcerned with, or perhaps unaware of the problems of neo-colonialism on the continent. They accepted uncritically what their lecturers told them. Even their proficiency in English, the language of instruction, compared unfavourably with that of the scholarship holders.

This is, of course, an exaggerated and generalised picture of the situation, but it was so perceived by the foreign students. They were in an anomalous situation. As foreigners they were under the control, not of University College, but of the Ministry of Education and Fine Arts. Because of the origins of the scholarship programme at the Accra Conference, its association with Haile Sellassie's personal prestige, and because it was essentially a political gesture towards African unity, it was important to the IEG that the students should be happy and successful. Thus, when their initial shock at the absence of a student union or newspaper and at the general political silence turned into vigorous attempts to stir things up, the IEG was placed in a very awkward position.

Although the scholarship students played an important role in awakening political consciousness in their classmates, they tended to be concerned with issues that were difficult to identify in the Ethiopian situation, with its admixture of feudalism and neo-colonialism. Rapidly, as we have seen, the Ethiopian students began to make their own analyses and to pick their own issues. The “festering dictatorship” of Haile Sellassie was the immediate enemy. The goal of the movement was to sharpen the contradictions between the government and the people to the point of explosion.^[7] But in order to mobilise the peasants, according to the conventional wisdom, it was necessary to achieve land reform, eliminate illiteracy, and eradicate elitism in educational opportunity. In 1974 an Ethiopian student leader argued against such gradualism:

“We are supposed to prepare the people for change, but they are ready for change. Peasants have started shooting their landlords. They know that landlords are the cause of most of their hardships [...] We want the establishment of [a] provisional people's republic, the grant of all democratic rights, and a fundamental change of the socio-economic structure of society.”

Despite the elitist structure of Ethiopian education, and in the absence of comprehensive and reliable data for the whole period, there is some evidence that a large proportion of students at Haile Sellassie I University (HSIU) were drawn from lower social strata. They were predominantly the children of merchants, clerks, soldiers, junior civil servants, and peasants. Three quarters of the students in a survey of university freshmen conducted in the 1960s received no financial support from their families. Only a third lived at home with their parents. The fathers of 82 percent of these students had received only traditional church education, or none at all.

Only about seven percent came from the top occupational strata—children of ministers, generals, members of parliament. Such people often sent their offspring abroad for higher, or even for secondary education, usually to the United States. Anecdote has it that there were so many Ethiopian students living in northeast Washington DC at this period that one street was nicknamed *Gojjami baranda*.

The students sampled at HSIU were predominantly born in rural areas, but moved to the cities and

towns for their secondary education:

TABLE V: THE SHIFT FROM RURAL AREAS FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION ^[8]		
Place of birth	Percentage [n=1064]	Place of Secondary Education [n=1063]
Addis Ababa or Asmara	24 %	61 %
Provincial capital	10 %	21 %
Town or village	66 %	18 %

Such students, although in a transitional position as far as class is concerned, could hardly be expected to accept uncritically the standardised liberal Western curriculum of HSIU. On the one hand, they were exhorted to reject “bad” and “foreign” ideologies and to deal with the reality of Ethiopia. On the other they were advised to leave politics to their elders and to accept whatever their North American professors told them. But any attempt to deal with the objective realities of Ethiopian society, or to unite theory and practice, was ruthlessly crushed by the regime and its police thugs.

The Ethiopian student revolt began, as is commonly the case, with specific university grievances, and then rapidly spilled over into a protest movement on much wider issues. As the university grew the possibility of meaningful contact between individual students and their teachers and administrators diminished. The students became alienated, as they have in hundreds of other universities all over the world. They had no control over their lives during their five or more years at the university.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDENT MOVEMENT

The following chronological account outlines the main events in the continuing student opposition to Haile Sellassie’s government, concentrating on the university where that opposition naturally found its focus at the apex of the educational system. There seem to have been three main periods in the development of student militancy in Ethiopia. But before the first period was one in which the political consciousness of the students was virtually unformed. The intelligentsia was numerically tiny and had not recovered from the Italian decimation of its ranks during the occupation, nor from the subsequent barren period of British administration.

The University College of Addis Ababa was inaugurated in 1951 under the administration of Canadian Jesuits, and in the period 1956 or 1957 the first student newspaper, *UC Calls*, was established, containing mainly didactic homilies on moral values.

In 1959, a Kenyan scholarship student started the *Campus Star*, a genuinely political student newspaper. It was vigorously critical of the paternalism of the Jesuits, who banned it after a few issues. The *UCAA Newsletter*, an official publication, replaced *News and Views*. In an attempt to pre-empt the role of the *Campus Star*, it included student contributions, but they were subject to administration censorship. In February Hagos Gebre Yesus, president of the Student Council, attended the eighth International Student Conference in Peru. The Student Council was subordinate to the Dean of Students, who also attended its meetings. Soon after this there was a first attempt to form a student union.

In January 1960 a seminar of student unions, attended by thirty student leaders from African countries, was held in Addis Ababa. The example that they set was not lost upon the Ethiopian students, and by the end of the year, on 11 December, there was an attempt to set up a national student union. A few days later, Girmame Neway and his brother Mengistu, together with other bodyguard officers, seized power while Haile Sellassie was out of the country. Girmame and some of the other officers had taken extension

courses at the university in constitutional history, economics and European history, and had come into contact with the first stirrings of student radicalism, even though the student critique of the emperor went no further than blaming him for retarding modernisation. Mengistu Neway clearly regarded the support of the students as important, for in the few days before the coup was crushed, he managed to meet with student leaders to explain his objectives. The students of Addis Ababa's colleges and schools organised a large demonstration in support of the coup, and published a manifesto criticising the exploitation of the peasants and the corruption of the administration. On the morning of 15 December, the radio station broadcast a cautious statement by student leaders, assuring listeners that "the new government is doing in its power to free you from oppression, giving you freedom of speech, press and political parties." *News and Views* was also cautious in its support of the change of government, provided that "it is not a coup d'état". Later estimates of the number of *active* supporters of Mengistu and Girmame among the students range from 20 to 100.

After the defeat of the Neway coup until 1967, when the University Students' Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) was founded, the student movement was inchoate and militant at the same time. The students forced several confrontations with the regime, but without scoring any major victories, Pyrrhic or otherwise. This period constituted the first stage in the development of the student movement.

In 1961 the students mounted their first anti-government demonstration. In September, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) launched its first attack on Ethiopian forces. The next year, at the university's Student Day ceremonies, held in May, students publicly read poems in Amharic containing oblique political references. The traditional technique of *samenna worq*, in which the speaker's real meaning is cleverly disguised in innocent-sounding ambiguities remains alive in modern Ethiopia in both verse and song. After this incident, the government warned students that they must stop meddling in politics, and the university authorities suspended several individual students. But despite their apparent powerlessness, the students did succeed in organising a union, without which their protests would have remained diffuse and ineffective. They also lacked a single issue that would mobilise and unify the whole student body.

Nevertheless, in 1963 the university was closed down for two weeks by student disturbances, and in 1964 further student demonstrations were held under the slogan 'Land to the Tiller!' A Presidential Commission was appointed and reported on student unrest. In 1965, the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe held its fifth annual conference in Vienna, and condemned feudalism, the Orthodox Church, the Imperial family, the nobility and the landed gentry, while advocating land reform and the establishment of an independent trade union movement. In a parallel development, the Ethiopian Students' Association in North America, at its thirteenth annual congress in Cambridge, Massachusetts, condemned the IEG as a "festering dictatorship". These two groups were the major overseas opposition groups at the time, although splinter groups also existed.

In February 1965, the government provided the unifying issue that the student movement needed. Parliament was debating a land reform bill, over which the feudal nobility and the bureaucrats were divided. Students gathered outside the parliament building to demonstrate against the feudal land tenure system, again under the slogan of "Land to the Tiller!" The government and the university administration reacted to this by banning the student union and suspending nine students for organising meetings. Some weeks later, in May, fighting between the police and students demonstrating in support of the nine led to the temporary closure of the university.

In 1966, in a minor victory, a protest by students about conditions in the Shola camps outside Addis Ababa, where beggars and vagrants were customarily incarcerated during state visits by foreign leaders, led to small improvements in the camps and inevitably to the arrest of the student leaders involved.

In April 1967, USUAA was formally constituted; its organ *Tagele* (Struggle) had first appeared a month

earlier. The students planned a march through the streets of Addis Ababa, which was immediately banned. Relying on the guarantee of the right of peaceful assembly in Article 45 of the Ethiopian Constitution, a small group of students then defied the ban and went ahead with the march. As the demonstrators left the university grounds, army units set upon them and then occupied the campus. The Emperor threatened to suspend all financial support to students who criticised the government. Student leaders were suspended, and the university stayed closed for three weeks. Article 45, in the meantime, was to all intents and purposes rendered a dead letter by the Detention Act, in effect a ninety-day detention law. Meanwhile, the second major report on student unrest, the *Awad-Strauss Report*, was completed.

THE SECOND PHASE: THE TACTICS OF MILITANCY

The second period in the development of the student movement, from 1967 to 1969, was marked by the introduction of more sophisticated tactics on the part of militant activists, who learned to use internal university issues to force confrontation with the authorities, during which process more radical demands could be presented.

A new agricultural income tax that was imposed on the peasantry, together with higher school fees, aroused the opposition of activist students in March 1968. However, the issue that was used to mobilise the main body of students was a fashion show. Militant students condemned mini-skirts, then in fashion, as un-Ethiopian, and some of them threw eggs at the models. They organised a class boycott, set up picket lines, and even tried to hold a large demonstration in the streets of Addis Ababa. The police and the army intervened, and sporadic rioting followed, during which cars were overturned, and the large United States Information Service (USIS) building was stoned. Discontent spread to schools and colleges elsewhere, and a systematic list of demands on agrarian and educational issues was presented to the government. Finally, the Emperor appeared on television and agreed to discuss the issues. The university remained closed for three weeks. The student publication *Struggle* was banned. For the first time, student militants had successfully adopted the tactic of using a relatively insignificant issue of wide emotional appeal in order to force a confrontation in which a real political critique could be mounted.

For three months during December 1968 and January and February 1969, there was unrest among high school students in Debre Berhan, Nazaret, Wollamo Soddo, and in Addis Ababa itself, over a range of issues. All high school and university students in the capital boycotted classes, mixing demands for educational reform with those for faster economic growth and measures to end mass unemployment. These demands included the withdrawal of the new school fees increase; a general overhaul of the educational system; expulsion of the Peace Corps for acting as an agent of cultural imperialism; an end to the conspicuous extravagance of Ethiopian government officials; the firing of officials responsible for the state of the educational system; and the public trial of those responsible for the shooting of students at peaceful demonstrations. After the Emperor appealed over the radio for a return to class, the IEG, as a diversionary tactic, organised demonstrations against Syria, where the ELF had just hi-jacked an aircraft.

The IEG closed the university and the high schools down for an indefinite period in March 1969. In subsequent unrest, Molotov cocktails were thrown at the Ethiopian headquarters of the Peace Corps, and political pamphlets were circulated. The IEG expelled some Russians and Czechs from the country. The following month five hundred university students were arrested after they had staged a non-violent sit-in, in protest against the re-opening of the secondary schools. One student died: his funeral was attended by another large crowd of about five hundred or so. In a series of decrees, the IEG increased the formal powers of the police to detain persons suspected of subversive activity up to six months without trial. In the meantime, some student leaders were sentenced to jail terms of seven years and six months. In August, six students and a civil servant hi-jacked an Ethiopian aircraft and flew to Khartoum.

The long drawn out and inconclusive confrontation between the students and the IEG had cost the country around Eth.\$4 million by September of 1969, and university enrolment had dropped by about two thirds as students withdrew. At this point, Haile Sellassie intervened to release and pardon those students who had been arrested earlier. He also sacked the conservative Minister of Education, Akaleworq Habte-Wold, the prime minister's brother. Akaleworq was widely believed to have commented, on being told that his ministry had a budget of Eth.\$12 million for education, that half would have sufficed.

These illusory concessions had no lasting effect, and contemporary publications show how entrenched positions were. In a special report from the university president^[9] published under the title *A Forward Look*, student unrest was dismissed as 'a world-wide problem' that was essentially irrelevant to Ethiopian conditions. The report mentioned the issues of student housing and sporting facilities, speaking of a 'dialogue' and of treating the Ethiopian situation 'realistically'. In November a new issue appeared, containing several provocative items about 'tribal' divisions in the country, about an attempt on Haile Sellassie's life by a former Patriot^[10] who was himself killed in the attempt, and material on an uprising in Bale province. The issue predictably enraged IEG officials, and *Struggle* was banned yet again.

THE THIRD PHASE: THE GOVERNMENT STRIKES BACK

The third and final phase of the struggle began when the government unleashed open armed repression against the students, and dropped all pretense about what kind of university it was, in fact, willing to tolerate. This phase lasted until the revolution of February to September 1974 removed the IEG from the scene.

On 12 December 1969, Tilahun Gizaw, the leftist president of the University Students Union of Addis Ababa or USUAA, as the organisation was known at the time, warned that students could not overthrow the regime by themselves, and that some kind of viable strategy needed to be developed. Two weeks later, on 28 December, Tilahun was killed by two gunshots fired from a slow-moving car near the Siddist Kilo campus.^[11] At the same time, and in an apparently unrelated incident, another student Tesfaye Gabriel was stabbed and later died in hospital. The deaths were surrounded with confusion. The IEG claimed that Tilahun had been murdered as the result of divisions between moderates and radicals within the USUAA.

The students removed Tilahun's body from the hospital morgue and refused to hand it over to the family for burial. The police and the military responded by sealing off the streets and the exits from the campus. They opened fire on the students, killing at least three (Abebe Berhe, Sebhatu Wubneh and Jemal Hussein) and wounding five, according to the Ministry of Information. But other sources claimed that as many as twenty students died and 157 were wounded. The stand-off focussed world media attention on Ethiopia. The German *Frankfurter Rundschau* commented that the Addis Ababa prison was said to be the largest in Africa and compared the IEG to the Fascist regime in Spain. In its issue of 30 January 1970, the Stockholm daily *Dagens Nyheter* described the student union as the first democratic movement in Ethiopia since World War II. Sweden stopped recruiting teachers and technical experts to serve in Ethiopia, and in Denmark there were demonstrations of protest against a proposed visit to Ethiopia by the King and Queen. The local Peace Corps director, and about a third of the Peace Corps' teachers in Ethiopia resigned in protest against government actions. The Dean of the Business College, a foreigner, was deported for protesting against the shootings. Sixty Ethiopian students in Moscow occupied the Imperial Ethiopian Embassy building on 30 December, and remained there for three hours in protest. But despite the world's attention, demonstrations by students in Harar, Mekelle, Axum and Adowa were similarly put down by force.

The university was closed, but after the parents of some of the students has appealed to Haile Sellassie in what one foreign newspaper perceptively called ‘the usual pattern’, it was reopened again shortly afterwards.^[12] In a long memorandum to the university community, the President stated that in future university guards would be trained in ‘crowd control, and other forms of disciplined activity’. He the student publication *Struggle* of incitement to violence, and the students themselves of actual violence in seizing the alumni coffee shop. He threatened the withdrawal of canteen and dormitory facilities should any more boycotts occur. In fact, the text is peppered with expressions such as ‘incitement’, ‘intimidation’, ‘militant few’ and ‘provocation’.

After several months, in October 1970, the university put ‘Title V’ of the Faculty Council regulations into place. This universally detested piece of academic legislation governed the formation of student unions and the control of student publications. Despite Title V, in March 1971 elections for USUAA were held without incident. In the same month, however, Addis Ababa high-school teachers went on strike with the support of their own students.^[13]

On 29 April the university students filed notice, as required by Title V, that they intended to hold a demonstration at the Science campus, but the university authorities refused permission because the proposed hour, four o’clock in the afternoon, was class time, and because the demonstration would allegedly have obstructed vehicles and pedestrians. The students went ahead and held the demonstration anyway—it was directed primarily against unpopular lecturers in the university, many of them Ethiopians. Early in May, the President demanded an explanation from USUAA as to why they had violated the rules. The USUAA executive responded by pointing out that free assembly was a guaranteed right under law, and that only students without classes had been asked to attend the rally. On 13 May a general assembly of students demanded formal recognition of USUAA, the repeal of Title V, and the return to student control of the coffee bar and the duplicating machines that had been confiscated two years previously, in 1969. By the afternoon of the same day the coffee bar had been occupied again, and some university staff members were complaining of harassment. The university declared a state of crisis and the students began to boycott classes; in response the authorities demanded that students return to class within a week, by 20 May.

Meanwhile, high-school students were criticising the university students for concentrating only on parochial university issues—despite the tactical wisdom of such a focus. The high-school students issued four demands of their own: a reduction in bus fares; a reduction of food prices; land reform; the abolition of the Shola ‘concentration camp’ for vagrants. Most of the schools in Addis Ababa, Nazareth and nearby towns were closed down as a wave of demonstrations were held. The students attacked and stoned buses—damaging 76—and Mercedes Benz cars. It was common knowledge that the Anbassa Bus Company was owned by the Emperor and a handful of his relatives. Students also attacked the home of *Ras Mesfin*, one of the biggest landowners in the country and the *endarasie* [governor] of Kaffa. In the *mercato* area of Addis Ababa, students forced traders to lower prices of such commodities as butter by as much as fifty percent. If the traders put the prices up again after the students had gone, then the students returned and poured kerosene over the goods. The police did not intervene. Eventually the IEG closed the schools and arrested over 4,000 high-school students, who were sent off to camps in the countryside. The IEG also announced plans to deal with price inflation—a point conceded.

Nearly a year later, in February 1972, the president of USUAA and some other students were arrested when they were caught mimeographing material in support of another strike by high-school pupils. There had already been three brief class boycotts in the university during the first semester of the 1971-1972 academic year, and these were cited by the Board of Governors in its decision to suspend USUAA on

21 February. One of the earlier boycotts had protested the non-recognition of Muslim religious holidays. In March, after two days of rallies outside the university administration building, during which the Ethiopian flag was lowered to half mast, IEG security forces occupied the campus, in the face of weak protests by faculty members. The student boycott stumbled on until 7 March, when just under half of the registered student enrollment of 4,757 withdrew from the university. The university attempted to slander these students, describing them as ‘academically marginal’. The weekly newspaper *Polisena Ermijaw* [The Police and Progress], nicknamed *Polisena Ergichaw* [The Police and Oppression] by the students, ran an article on student vandalism on 14 March.^[14] The official press had previously ignored student opposition. The article blamed ‘a handful of agitators with a foreign ideology’ for the crisis. ‘If students want to participate in politics outside the campus, they have to wait until they finish their studies,’ the piece argued, going on to ask why disturbances always occurred around examination time, and exhorting students to obey their (presumably wiser) teachers, parents, and of course the government.

In December, in a spectacular example of propaganda by the deed, six former students, including two young women, attempted to hi-jack an Ethiopian Airlines Boeing 707 between Addis Ababa and Asmara. All the hi-jackers except for one of the young women were killed in a mid-air gun battle, and the aircraft returned to Addis Ababa, where all the Ethiopian passengers were detained for questioning. Later, student sources claimed that the attempt was a protest against the repression of the student movement: the government line was that the incident was an ELF operation. On 28 December, university students held a one-day class boycott in memory of their fallen comrades.

Four months later, in April 1973, news of massive famine in Wollo province began to reach the capital by word of mouth, while government news media remained silent. On 20 April, students again boycotted classes at the university, in order to hold a meeting to discuss the famine. This meeting was violently broken up by the *Fetna Deresh* [riot police], who beat up employees, students and passers-by indiscriminately. Three days later faculty members passed a resolution on ‘Peace on Campus’, deploring the brutal police response to ‘alleged provocation’ and condemning the invasion of the campus, the cruel and severe beatings, and terrorisation and wanton destruction by the police.

Haile Sellassie I University hosted the prestigious third session of the International Congress of Africanists in December 1973, but significantly, the sessions were held off campus. Nevertheless, one prominent scholar agreed to address an open meeting on campus. Students in the audience insisted on the election of one of their number to the chair for the session, and after the address, seized the opportunity to use question time as a forum for speech making. There was no overt intimidation, but the university president subsequently used this incident as another excuse to attack the student body, describing ‘an atmosphere so poisoned that it was clearly impossible to carry on a dispassionate discussion’ and alleging violence and vandalism. Meanwhile, on 19 December the third of a series of class boycotts held in November and December began, with the students demanding the restitution of USUAA. The next day the *Fetna Deresh* were called in once more, and the boycott broke down in confusion.

THE 1974 REVOLUTION: ‘PREPARING THE FOOD’

Events were moving fast on the national level in the meantime. By the beginning of 1974, it was clear that the government was no longer in effective control of the country. Students campaigned relentlessly to try to force the IEG to recognise and acknowledge the famine, which was claiming thousands of lives daily. The IEG cynically attempted to use the worldwide oil crisis as an excuse to double petrol prices and rescue the prestigious Assab oil refinery from bankruptcy. This triggered a strike by the taxi-drivers of Addis Ababa, a strike which marked the beginning of the end for the monarchical regime. A student aphorism of the time had it that ‘the students prepared the meal. The taxi drivers are cooking it, but the army will eat it.’

By February 1974, amid nationwide unrest, including the strike of transport workers and an army mutiny, the students were again demanding the right to organise. On 14 March the Faculty Council, aware of political trends outside the university, adopted a conciliatory attitude and agreed to the restitution of USUAA, recommencement of publication of *Struggle*, the setting up of a committee to investigate allegations of detention cells on the campus, the reinstatement of students disciplined earlier in the year, an attempt to secure the release of student and staff political prisoners in government jails, and an increase in the salaries of university gardeners and cleaners. However, the president and the two vice-presidents all refused to resign.

From February onwards, the students were no longer the focus of political opposition to the regime, as trade unions and other organisations of civil society began to play an active role. Above all, with the formation of the Military Coordinating Committee in April, the armed forces moved decisively onto the public political stage. It is not the purpose of this text to investigate the relationship between the student movement and the military government that came to power in 1974, nor to predict the course that a confrontation between the two might eventually take. But it is becoming clear that many Ethiopian students are no longer willing to trust the military, and that despite a two-year closure of the university, their organisational capacity retains its vitality.

Under Haile Sellassie, the combination of a cynical and over-confident regime, a rapidly expanding urban bureaucracy hungry for high-level human resources, systematic neglect of the agricultural sector, and the physical courage of individual students over a period of nearly fifteen years, all combined to create a student movement that was one of the most radical and vigorous in Africa. Although such a movement cannot, in the nature of things, wield political power, it can exercise considerable influence on the course of events. The military regime was well aware of this. An Ethiopian student leader commenting on the rural literacy campaign of 1974 remarked

The aim of the army is to disorganise the progressive elements by scattering them about. Once the students are scattered and disorganised, they cannot oppose the military government.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

Although the literature on modern Ethiopian society is extensive, much of it is unsatisfactory for various reasons. There are several stereotypes of Ethiopia ('the ancient Christian kingdom', 'the outpost of Semitic civilisation in Africa') that have prevented writers from drawing the necessary rigorous conclusions about the country and the society. In addition, while much work has been done on individual peoples or on particular periods, there has been little attempt at synthesis, or at the achievement of an overview of the whole society. There is still no adequate general history of Ethiopia, nor of the period from the death of Minilik II to the present day.

Some Soviet writers—notably A. G. Kokov in the collections *Formirovanie rabocheho klassa stran Azii i Afriki* [The formation of the working class in Asia and Africa] (Moscow, 1971) and *Profsoiuzy stran severnoi i severo-vostochnoi Afriki* [Trade unions in northern and northeastern Africa] (Moscow, 1965)—have paid attention to the problem of class formation in Ethiopia. But R. Avakov and G. Mirskii, in an article in *Mirovaia Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia*, no.4 (1962), p.68-82, made explicit the dilemma of the Soviet theoretician, namely that Third World states can be classified according to their class structure or *according to their foreign policy positions*. No Soviet writers—and virtually no Western ones either—have attempted an analysis of the student opposition. Both Richard Greenfield (*Ethiopia: a new political history* [London, Pall Mall, 1965]) and Robert Hess (*Ethiopia: the modernisation of an autocracy* [Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1970]) include

useful descriptions of the student attitude to the regime. Addis Hiwet (*Ethiopia from autocracy to revolution* [London: ROAPE, 1975]) comments perceptively on the events described in this text, in the context of a discussion of the evolution of 'military-feudal-colonialism' over the preceding seventy years.

David G. Korten (*Planned change in a traditional society* [New York: Praeger, 1972]) attempts an ambitious explanation of student unrest in psychological terms, which leads him, inevitably, into a blind alley. He stresses the egalitarian and democratic nature of Oromo social structure in contrast to the authoritarian and hierarchical Amhara social system, but largely ignores the class nature of the wider Ethiopian society and the reality of the exploitation against which the students, among others, were protesting.

Most of the economic data in this study have been drawn from Assefa Bequele and Eshetu Chole (*A profile of the Ethiopian economy* [Addis Ababa: Oxford University Press, 1969]), which paints a bleak picture of the situation in the early 1960s. Data on education have also been taken from the Ministry of Information pamphlet *Ethiopia today: education* (Addis Ababa, 1973). It is fair to assume that the Ministry's enrolment figures were exaggerated for propaganda purposes, but they were still so low that comment is superfluous.

I have in addition used several documents issued by the former Haile Sellassie I University, including *A forward look: a special report from the president* (Addis Ababa, 1969); Office of the Registrar, *Student data 1963/4-1973/4* (Addis Ababa, s.d.); *The President's Report* (Addis Ababa, annual); and a series of circulars, memoranda and resolutions issued by the university authorities, by various faculty bodies, and by USUAA from 1969 to 1974. My descriptions of events from 1971 to 1974 are also based on personal observation and on conversations with eye-witnesses.

The following works were also consulted:

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ENDNOTES

* This text was originally presented to the 12th Annual Social Science Conference of the East African Universities, at the University of Dar es Salaam, 20-22 December 1976. The text has been corrected, between May 1999 and April 2001, with regard to spelling, clumsy phrasing and gender-insensitive language.

[1] Over two hundred United States companies had agencies in Ethiopia by 1967, many of them representing multi-million dollar investments in such areas as potash mining and spice processing.

- [2] Assefa Begele, "Population and labour force projections for Ethiopia, 1968-1983" *Ethiopian Journal of Development Research* vol.1, no.1 (April 1974), p.24.
- [3] Haile Sellassie I University, now Addis Ababa University, consisted of four campuses in the capital and two provincial campuses in the towns of Gondar and Dire Dawa. There was also a private institution in Eritea, the University of Asmara.
- [4] *Social survey of Addis Ababa 1960* (Addis Ababa: University College of Addis Ababa, n.d.), p.93.
- [5] *Ethiopia Today: Education* (Addis Ababa: Ministry of Information, 1973), p.37.
- [6] Haile Sellassie I University, Office of the Registrar, *Student data* (Addis Ababa, mimeo, n.d.)
- [7] Every revolution is a function of two criteria: the nature of the enemy and the goal of the movement. See André Glucksmann, "Strategy and revolution," *New Left Review* no.52 (1968).
- [8] R. Giel and J. van Luijk, "A follow-up of 1066 freshmen at Haile Sellassie I University," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* vol.8, no.1 (1970), p.21-30.
- [9] The university was structured along the lines of an American four-year college, and used United States terminology. Thus the chief executive officer, who would have been titled the Rector or the Vice-Chancellor elsewhere in Africa, was called the President.
- [10] An anti-Fascist guerrilla from the period of the Italian occupation, 1935-1941.
- [11] Tilahun was, in a society where family ties are perhaps even more important than usual, the younger brother of the widow of Haile Sellassie's deceased son.
- [12] *Dagens Nyheter* [Stockholm], 30 January 1970.
- [13] The present writer was employed at the university between February 1971 and March 1975, and was an eyewitness to many of the events described between these dates.
- [14] *Polisena Ermijaw*, 30 Yekatit.