ETHIOPIAN WARRIORHOOD: DEFENCE, LAND & SOCIETY 1800-1941 (2018)

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In Imperial Ethiopia, the *Chewa* were the guardians of (some of) the people and the military vanguard of the empire, warriors who "bore responsibility for defending land and society" (p. xix) – and the story of their rise and fall, as Tsehai Berhane-Selassie tells it, offers an insight into both Ethiopian history itself, and also into general problems of transition to modernity and state-society relationships. Dr. Berhane-Selassie is well placed to tell this story, due to her family connections with the Ethiopian aristocracy and the court of Haile Selassie. That latter connection was by no means a happy one: at an early stage in this book, she tells of how her father ran afoul of the Emperor and was subjected to a period of house arrest and surveillance. This mirrors the fate of the *Chewa* themselves in the last decades of the old Ethiopia. At the end of the nineteenth century European imperialist forces were circling around Africa as a whole. Among them was Italy, who would try to seize Ethiopia in 1896 at the battle of Adwa, only to suffer a famously ignominious defeat. Even after Fascist Italy finally occupied Ethiopia in the 1930s, they would be harried at every point by the *Chewa,* who organized guerrilla resistance while the Emperor remained in exile. This was perhaps their finest hour: never, afterwards, would they have the same position in Ethiopian society. As centralizing and modernizing forces emerged in late imperial Ethiopia, the *Chewa* found themselves squeezed into obsolescence.

So, who were the *Chewa*? An image of imperial Ethiopia as a "feudal" society provides an initial insight into their social position and political role. Like the knights of medieval Europe, they could be seen as one pillar of a tripartite division of society, one in which peasants and clergy upheld the social order alongside them. 'I say that the *Chewa* "could" be seen as such' – a caveat which the reader should note. As Berhane-Selassie makes clear, characterizations of Ethiopia as "feudal" are only helpful up to a certain point, and beyond that point the historical analogy between Ethiopian society and that of Medieval Europe breaks down (pp. xx, 3). Where it breaks down most spectacularly is in the relationship between the *Chewa* and the people from whose ranks they emerged – the peasant masses of highland Ethiopia.

A key point is that warriorhood, in imperial Ethiopia, was a fundamentally meritocratic occupation. Ordinary men (and war was almost always, though never quite exclusively, a male undertaking), could enlist in the

ranks of a local commander, and one day hope to rise through those ranks to a position of high military respect. Young boys were socialized for military life at a very young age, when they played childhood games dedicated to the development of their leadership potential – and their "ability to move in political society" (p. 145). This entailed a heavy emphasis on team formation, self-control and humility, and the forging of strong solidaristic friendship bonds with their peers. Their boyhood games mimicked war itself, both in the rhetoric deployed and the tools employed.

For older boys, as for men, military training was more intense, involving, very often, the use of horses. Travel on horseback was necessary for military mobilization, which often involved deployment to distant border regions, and also for familiarization of would-be *Chewa* with their local environments. The ecology of the Ethiopian highland communities, located as they are atop an elevated chain of rugged mountains and high mountain valleys, created a militarily vital connection between the people and the land, a connection designated by the emic term *hager.* This people-land unit was always situated in particular ecological zones and conceived of in terms rich in affective tropes. Those from outside the area were assumed to be marginal, or enemies, or worthy targets of (literal) emasculation.

Chewa warriors were always required to be both strongly rooted in their communities, and highly networked as well. These orientations had to be retained and renewed even in times of war or civil disturbance. Marriage ceremonies, for example, were events when virility and social bonds were celebrated and renewed and the *Chewa* would recommit themselves to their local lands and communities. With all this behind them, and much work to do before them, the *Chewa* flourished for many decades. Tsehai Berhane-Selassie provides a wealth of detail on the cultural and social world they and their communities built.

This world may not be one for which the concept of "feudal" is as well suited as it may at first sight appear, but it was a world of the kind that was ultimately abolished by the kinds of historical processes that led to the end of other "feudal" orders. As noted above, the feudal concept is not really applicable to Ethiopia, other than as a heuristic "rule of thumb" with which to begin an investigation of local realities. It may not be really applicable to the European context in which it emerged the concept of "feudalism" is a product of the eighteenth-century French enlightenment, and not of the historical period it proposes to understand. If the neologism "feudal" is to have any utility in understanding either medieval Europe or 19th and 20th century Ethiopia, it is in highlighting how both are very different cases of societies that went through experiences of acceleration, in which previously stable social environments were disrupted by processes of change and communication which grew consistently faster over time, until they finally brought an end to what had appeared – at least to some – to be eternal social orders.

The breaks with the past wrought by modernity have inspired many generations of social theorizing. Some of the most fruitful of these have been, in my opinion, those that emphasize the connection between human society and the natural world, and which pay attention to the networks and connections human beings forge with that natural world and with each other. Berhane-Selassie's rich historical ethnography is as relevant to anyone working on those themes as it is to those concerned with the military history of Ethiopia, or of Africa in general.

It must have seemed that that way of life that the *Chewa* represented would continue to serve Ethiopia into the future, given their role in the victory at Adwa and in the resistance to Italian fascist imperialism. This may have been the *Chewa's* finest hour: it was also the prelude to their decline. After Ethiopia became a front in the Second World War, and then a zone of British military administration. Subsequent developments sounded the end of the *Chewa*, but not of their memory.

The British would install themselves in Eritrea for another decade: further south, in Ethiopia itself, they reinstated Haile Selassie as the Emperor of an expanded Ethiopian state. He would rule until his fall in the revolution of 1974. Before that, in the Cold War, Haile Selassie became a reliable ally of the west (which fostered the federation of Eritrea with the rest of Ethiopia: later, in 1962, after revolt broke out in the Eritrean lowlands, he abrogated the former Italian colony's self-governing status, an act followed by three decades of war). The Emperor allowed many of the old resistance fighters to form a new "territorial army" (the designation of which must have been inspired by the British volunteer formation of the same name), but also elevated his modern-minded camp followers to the position of a new aristocracy. The latter tactic excluded the *Chewa* from their old status, while the former tactic provided breathing space for the creation of a modern, professional army. It was from the ranks of that army that the dictatorship of the *Derg* emerged after the revolution of 1974: its rule was far more repressive than that of the Emperor, but it would ultimately fall to revolutionary armies from the provinces.

Today, in Ethiopia, the centralized state still struggles against centripetal forces that threaten renewed crisis, and even collapse of the state itself. The inability to politically integrate Ethiopia's rival provinces and their respective ethnic groups has led, since November 2020, to a renewed civil war, one that has, as of this writing (November 2021), involved brutal atrocities against civilians on all sides (see Nyssen 2021, Africa Research Bulletin 2021) This suggests that the issues raised by the rise and fall of the *Chewa* will not go away – especially those relating to the relationship between the Ethiopian masses and central state authorities. For the masses, Berhane-Selassie says, still feel that the idea of the *Chewa* evokes 'trustworthiness, sincerity,

reserve, and unselfish consideration of others' (p. 291). Would Ethiopia's civilian communities feel or speak this way about any of the parties at war in their country's present catastrophe?

We cannot yet say how Ethiopia's peoples would answer that question. We can say, however, that Tsehai Berhane-Selassie has written a book about Ethiopia's recent past that will be relevant to her country's future. Anyone working on the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia or Eritrea would also be well-advised to read this text, as would anyone, beyond Ethiopia and its neighbours, who is involved in similar debates over similar cases.

References

Nyssen, J., 2021. Catastrophe stalks Tigray, again. *Ethiopia Insight*, 19 February 2021. https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2021/02/19/catastrophe-stalks-tigray-again/ Accessed 25.11.2021

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