Aksum as a "Seedbed" Society

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In my commemorative piece on the Battle of Adwa, I began by considering the meanings of the term "historic" (Levine 1996). When we call an event historic, I suggested, we do so either because it occurs for the very first time; or it has led to significant consequences; or it has become symbolically charged. Thus, as a *first time event,* Abebe Bikila's victory in the marathon race at the 1960 Olympics in Rome was historic, the first time an Ethiopian won a gold medal. We also designate events as historic when their *consequences significantly alter* the shape of subsequent *history*. In that sense, protection given to disciples of the Prophet Muhammad by the Ethiopian king in the seventh century was historic; it led Muhammad to advise his followers to spare Ethiopia from the jihad of Islamic expansion that took place soon after. Even when events have no significant direct consequences we tend to call them historic when they *symbolize* important national or universal human ideals. For example, the suicide of Emperor Tewodros II or the speech of Emperor Haile Selassie I to the League of Nations in 1937 each did little to change the course of history but came to be symbolic of, respectively, Ethiopian honor and pride of independence, and Ethiopia's integrity and European flaccidity in the early years of fascism.

Like the Battle of Adwa, the Aksumite polity was historic in all three respects. It was surely a historic first: the first time a kingdom of sub-Saharan Africa became so powerful as to function on a par with the most advanced polities of the era. Its rise and expansion had historic consequences, not least the rule over Yemen for seven decades and the conquest of the Christian kingdom of Alwa, and the perfection of a writing system that became bedrock for future Ethiosemitic languages.

In these remarks, however, I intend to emphasize the historic character of Aksum as a source of significant symbolism–of beliefs and images which provided identity and direction for the Empire of Ethiopia. I shall do so, not by adducing hitherto unknown facts, but by a shift of perspective on the legacy of Aksum. The perspective in question builds on that embodied in my *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*. Its focal point will be the paradigm of the "seedbed" society, a notion that Talcott Parsons introduced in *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Parsons 1966; revised 1977).[1]

1 In *Greater Ethiopia* I already broached the idea of viewing Aksum as a seedbed society (Levine 1974: 92, 110). This paper aims to present a deepened and expanded treatment of that notion.

1. Societal Evolution: Early Stages

Parsons's seminal essay formed part of an effort by a group of sociologists of the 1960s to reclaim the idea of *societal evolution*. Although Parsons himself had dismissed the idea of social evolution forcefully in his first major work in 1937 – an idea which remains anathema to most social anthropologists – he sought three decades later to reclaim it in ways that avoided the objectionable features of the earlier view: unilinearity, uniformity, and the valorization of evolutionary progress.[2] In his reformulation of evolutionary theory Parsons emphasized the importance of different "stages" of evolutionary development, stating that "we do not conceive societal evolution to be either a continuous or a simple linear process, but we can distinguish between broad levels of advancement without overlooking the considerable variability found in each" (Parsons 1966: 26). Broadly speaking, he distinguished three evolutionary levels–primitive, intermediate, and modern–identified by the scope of their "generalized adaptive capacity."

The category of primitive society, under which Parsons placed all societies that have not developed written language, designates a type of social order that is structurally undifferentiated. Its initial substage embodies a quartet of essential features: systems of religion, kinship, technology, and symbolic communication. The last of these offers a vehicle for expressing a group's collective identity, or "constitutive symbolism," characteristically in terms that link in some way with the kinship system (Parsons 1966: 33). His prime exemplars of this category are the primitive societies of aboriginal Australia in which "the *whole society* constitutes a *single affinal collectivity* composed of descent groups allied through the marriages of their members" (Parsons 1966: 36; 1977: 32).

A second category designates an "advanced primitive stage," which arises when the strict status equivalence of the intermarrying kinship groups breaks down. Certain lineages distinguish themselves by controlling special resources and/or by adopting specialized political, military, or religious functions. This stage accordingly involves the growing importance of the societal collectivity, which provides grounds for conferring higher status on certain of the kinship groups. As examples Parsons cites the Shilluk of Sudan, with a king who incarnates the divine mythical founder, and the Zulu of South Africa, in which a royal administrative apparatus dominates the religious component of diffuse leadership institutions.

The Empire of Ethiopia contained many exemplars of both types of society at this evolutionary level. The first primitive substage would be exemplified by the Majangir of present-day Gambela (Stauder 1971) and the Hamar of the Omo region

2 Since some readers may be inclined to dismiss this exposition on grounds that employing the notion of societal evolution is necessarily suspect if not illegitimate, let me emphasize the importance of those revisions. In the course of making them, Parsons was aided substantially by a seminal paper of Robert Bellah, "Religious Evolution" (1964)–and in fleshing out his evolving conception, by the assistance of Victor Lidz. Bellah's forthcoming volume on Religious Evolution will provide the most comprehensive realization of this conception to date.

(Strecker 1988). Exemplars of the advanced primitive type would be the Konso towns (Hallpike 1972), Oromo societies under the Gada system (Legesse 1973), and the five Gibe kingdoms (Hassen 1994, Lewis 2002).

2. Aksum as an "Archaic" Society

The development of written language maintained by an upper class marks the momentous watershed which separates primitive societies from the intermediate level of evolutionary development, which Parsons divides into two substages: "archaic" societies and "historic empires."

In archaic societies, knowledge of how to write belongs not to the entire upper-class but only to specialists: A literate priesthood responsible for maintaining a stable tradition, and craftsmen who provide the technology needed for keeping records. The latter makes possible a wider extension of political control through an administrative apparatus. The literate priesthood makes it possible to evolve a cultural system, including a cosmological religious belief system, which is independent of the social system. The belief system consists of esoteric knowledge usually interpreted for the society by temple priesthoods with their cults.

The other defining feature of archaic societies is the close linkage between the religious and the political domains. Archaic societies are headed by a powerful monarch whose charisma is based on a fusion of religious legitimation and politico-military strength. Archaic societies tend to divide into a three-class social order: A ruling class built around the monarch, his notables, bureaucrats, and priests; a less centralized stratum of administrators; and the common people, mostly agriculturalists and also craftsmen and merchants, and slaves.

Societies at this stage include numerous peoples of ancient Asia and of pre-Columbian Latin America. Those discussed by Parsons include Egypt and Mesopotamia. In Egypt, the pharaonic fusion of religious and political domains was effected by mean of conceiving the ruler as himself a divine being. In Mesopotamia it took the form of requiring religious legitimation by one or more gods, reinforced by annual ceremonies that refreshed the king's solidarity with divine forces.

Archaic society was the evolutionary stage attained in ancient Aksum. Craft literacy and deified royalty were its hallmarks. Literacy would have been confined to priests and those who kept royal records and administrative accounts; there is nothing to suggest that literacy was spread beyond the royal court and the stratum of priests and administrators. Those who wrote the epigraphic inscriptions often did so in three languages–Ge'ez, Sabaean, and Greek. As early as the first century CE, we have reason to believe that King Zoskales was acquainted with Greek literature, and that his courtiers included Greeks and Hellenized Egyptians (Taddesse 1972: 22).

Besides craft literacy, Aksumite society also harbored the other key defining trait of an archaic society, an all-powerful ruler who embodied the intimate tie between religious and political domains. The kings of Aksum were tied to the

religious order by viewing them as descendants of gods, in particular, of the god of war Maḥrem (Greek Ares). The king's politico-military prowess was symbolized by the imperial title of *niguse negest*, king of kings. In inscriptions this was usually accompanied by a list of names of the peoples whom he had conquered and who paid tribute to him. The fusion of his political-military and religious roles can be seen in the famous inscriptions regarding King Ezana, which describe him as "Aeizanas, king of the Aksumites, Himyarites and Raeidan, the Ethiopians, the Sabaeans and Silei, Tiamo and the Beja and Kasu, *king of kings, son of the invincible god Ares"* (Munro-Hay 1991: 225; emphasis mine). The fusion of religious, political, and martial values give the Aksumite monarch enormous charisma. He was celebrated by having his picture on coins across six centuries. He was glorified by the erection of huge obelisks used to mark graves. At what was probably the apex of Aksumite glory, the reign of Kaleb, the royal residence consisted of a four-tower palace decorated with bronze statues of unicorns. Like other kings, Kaleb was honored by victory monuments in the form of enormous granite thrones.

3. The "Historic Empire" of Medieval Ethiopia

Parsons designates as "historic empires" the final evolutionary stage prior to the evolutionary breakthrough that ushers in the system of modern societies. This is the only pre-modern stage generally familiar to humanists, historians, and social scientists. It has been the province of scholars in the areas of civilizational studies. Sociologists know such societies mainly through Max Weber's comparative studies of world religions and the ideas of Karl Jaspers and Shmuel Eisenstadt on axial civilizations, all of whom influenced Parsons.[3] In the schema Parsons presents, this stage develops when the central features of archaic societies become transformed though a process of radical cultural differentiation, thanks largely to the spread of literacy to the entire ruling class. At this stage the cultural systems become separated from the societal matrix that gave birth to them. The evolutionary development of a separate stratum of literate upper-class men spells the end of divine kingship. It makes the bearers of transcendent values autonomous vis-à-vis the political authority and enables them to exert a directing and controlling influence back onto the social systems. Monarchs themselves no longer *embody* transcendence, but must rather be *directed* by the ideas and values codified in transcendent belief systems.

Shifting the cultural system to a distinct level produces substantial changes in the social order. It reconfigures the whole system of social stratification. The pivotal shift here involves the establishment of a stratum of literati that is separate and distinct from the stratum of political rulership. The former derives its authority by virtue of privileged connection with the transcendent order, which lends them

3 The classic sources would include Weber 1921; Jaspers 1949; and Eisenstadt 1963. See also Eisenstadt 1982 and Levine 2004.

a dimension of moral authority that supersedes that of the king and his noblemen. The social order thereby divides into two domains, the cultural elite and a non-elite. Those close to the transcendent order are illustrated in China by the scholar-gentry class; by the twice-born Brahmans in India; and by the ulema in Islam. In Rome, this stratum consisted of the senatorial class, whose charisma drew from the legal system anchored in the Stoic conception of a Law of Nature. In all such cases, those literati carried moral authority over the monarch. In different ways, they elaborated a new worldview which differentiates sharply between the realms of the divine or transcendent and the human, and which markedly broadens the reference of the constitutive symbolism.

In Ethiopia this would be the stage that emerged with the establishment of the Solomonid Dynasty in Shoa in 13th century. Ethiopia's medieval empire was not just centered in a different part of the country from Aksum, it constituted *a different type of society* – one that had attained a higher level of general adaptive capacity. This was precisely because of what Parsons identified as the hallmarks of historic empires. In contrast to what might have been possible under the kings of Aksum, the differentiation of an autonomous stratum of literati made it possible for monks to diffuse the Ethiopian national religious system far and wide. They were able to "broadcast" their ideas, as Parsons suggestively terms it. The expansion of literacy made it possible to extend administrative control to the far reaches of the empire. This would include detailed records of land grants that greatly facilitated administration (and would provide a historiographic treasure for future scholars (Crummey 2000).

They could also develop an indigenous literary tradition that formed a point of reference for a more inclusive collective identity. This came to a head with two major texts of the medieval period, the *Kibre Negest* of the 13th century and the later *Fitḥe Negest*. The *Kibre Negest*–the Honor of Kings–sought explicitly to provide a coherent narrative for the legitimization of royalty. The emperor of Ethiopia was to be honored, not because of divine lineage, but because he descended from the line of a prestigious human ancestor, King Solomon. The divine favor which shifted from Israel to Ethiopia was based, moreover, on a thoroughly human action: the clandestine removal of the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. In addition, the *Kibre Negest* expanded the scope of the constitutive symbolism of the Ethiopian collectivity. The polity was no longer tied to a specific place, Aksum, but to the entire Empire with its ever-shifting boundaries; nor to a specific ethnie, but to the multiethnic panorama that was historic Ethiopia (Levine [1974] 2000: 92-112).[4]

The *Fitḥe Negest* (Laws of the Kings) consisted of a compilation of religious and civil laws redacted in the 16th century. Unlike the *Kibre Negest*, the *Fitḥe Negest* was

4 The *Kibre Negest* assumes the equivalence of land = people = nation = polity, using phrases like *bihére Ityopiya* and *seb'a Ityopiya* as terms that connote land, people, and country alike (Levine 2004a: 363). For an important new interpretation of the origins of the *Kibre Negest*, see Getatchew Haile, Forthcoming.

not an indigenous Ethiopian composition, but rather a translation of a 13th-century text composed by an Egyptian Christian jurist. The date of its translation into Ge'ez remains uncertain, but it was arguably in the 16th century. Quickly it assumed the authority of an antique text, and was adopted by the educated elite as the supreme law of the land. As late as Ethiopia's revised Penal Code in 1957 and the Civil Code of 1960, the legislators deferred to the *Fiṯḥe Negest* as the ancient and venerable Law of the Land (Paulos Tzadua 2005). By virtue of the traditional educational system, in which the elite were schooled in the classical Ge'ez language, the vast territory under the reign of the emperors of Ethiopia was to some extent united by virtue of having this common authoritative legal referent.

4. Aksum as a "Seedbed" Society?

What made it possible for the Ethiopian king to shed his character as a divine figure and subordinate himself to a set of symbols that transcended his earthly authority? The matter may be elucidated, first, by comparing the king of Aksum with two other divine monarchs, those of ancient Egypt and of historic Japan, and by considering the special features of the Judaeo-Christian religion which the Ethiopian elite imported.

One key variable, I suggest, concerns *what constituted the order of divinity with which the king was supposed to be imbued.* In Egypt, the kingship not only formed an essential aspect of the sacred order, but constituted a crucial link in the continuity of all meaningful phenomena. As offspring of Re, the sun god, the pharaoh was symbolically connected to the general procreative order of animal life and to nature's cyclical processes–the planting and harvesting of crops and the Nile's annual flooding. He thereby functioned to regulate the cosmic order of human affairs and even of organic and inorganic nature, and did so through a large core of priestly officials to whom he imparted his divinely ascribed charismatic powers (Parsons 1966: 54-62). It was thus impossible for the pharaonic system to accommodate a split between political and religious domains that would have been necessary for it to have evolved to the level of a historic empire.

In Japan, the breakthrough to such a bifurcated order never happened either. The Japanese emperor was always thought of as a divine being; his status, *tenno*, signifies "heavenly emperor." Like pharaoh, he was descended from the ultimate source of living things, deities who procreated the islands of Japan as well as its imperial lineage. The emperors of Japan believed to be descendants of the earliest divine being, Izanagi no Mikoto (Exalted Male) and Amataseru, the sun goddess.[5] What *tenno* symbolized, however, was not the entire cosmic order as did pharaoh, but the state of Japan and the unity of the Japanese people. Accordingly,

5 Until Japan's defeat in World War II, children were taught that they would go blind if they looked directly in the face of their divine emperor; photographs of him in houses were covered so that he could not be seen directly.

sacral places–like Mount Fuji–came to symbolize the Japanese nation. That "sacred particularity," as Japan's worldview has been called, made it virtually impossible to separate the religious from the political systems in Japan. The more universalistic notions of transcendence that came to Japan through Confucianism and Buddhism were fatefully subordinated to the sacred particularity of Japan's "liturgical, sacral, primordial, 'natural' collectivity [which] ultimately prevailed–albeit in continuously reconstructed forms." In contrast to the Chinese emperor, therefore, he could never be overthrown by appeals to transcendent values (Eisenstadt 1997: 250-1).

In contrast, by virtue of linking the Aksumite king's divinity with the god of war–rather than with the source of all life as in Egypt and Japan–it proved less problematic to circumscribe royal authority over time, delimiting it as that of a politico-military ruler under the aegis of Judaeo-Christianity. For that reason, it did not matter so much that, two centuries after King Ezana's conversion, royal thrones bore metal statues dedicated to pre-Christian deities such as Astar, Beher, Midr–and Mahrem, the god of war. There was a world of difference between acknowledging a transcendent God, for Whom Constantine established a Church that would eventually empower its papal representative to force kings to bow down–and an emperor who lorded it over his subjects absolutely, despite issuing gold coins with a cross instead of a crescent.

Additional light on the Ethiopian case may be thrown by the concluding chapter of Parsons's brief reconstruction of the theory of societal evolution, entitled "The 'Seedbed' Societies: Israel and Greece."[6] That chapter outlines a type of society he isolates for producing cultural innovations that proved highly significant for societies not their direct evolutionary sequels. They do so by virtue of "a basic loss of political independence, and the transfer of primary prestige within the relevant populations to elements which were not carriers of primary political responsibility at the societal level, but specialists in the maintenance and development of the distinctive cultural systems themselves." What is more, "the innovation had to involve, under the leadership of the most important classes, a differentiation of *the society as a whole* from the others to which it was closely related. It had to become a new *type of society,* not merely a new sub-system within an already existent type" (Parsons 1966: 96).

Such were the features that came to characterize the societies of ancient Israel and Greece. The Israelites' conception of Yahweh emphasized the absolute sovereignty of God in ways that accentuated the chasm between the divine and the human, and thereby made it out of the question for any human king to claim any semblance of divinity. Even so, early on Israel resembled its neighbors in having an "oriental monarchy" associated with a quasi-tribal sacrificial cult centered on the Temple. The Babylonian captivity and the subsequent destruction of the Temple eliminated

6 In the slightly revised version of this essay, which Parsons issued in a volume that also included its sequel, *The System of Modern Societies*, he omitted the seedbed metaphor. It was retained, however, in the accompanying introduction by the volume editor, Jackson Toby. I prefer to use it here for its evocative quality, rather than the more literal descriptive phrase Parsons used later, "cultural legacy for later societies" (Parsons 1976: 99).

the cult and left Judaism with the law as the exclusive medium of contact with the transcendent deity. Grounded in the Mosaic Decalogue, the law constituted the charter of the Jewish people. The Prophetic movement sharpened the significance of the law as distinct from the value of political autonomy. That in turn lent a special salience to literacy and disciplined knowledge of the law which, given the relatively egalitarian character of the society, placed a premium on securing knowledge of basic religious documents. Israel became one of the first societies to develop extensive literacy among all its responsible adult male members. The loss of political independence left the Jews with a divinely mandated legal code borne by literati who were independent of any concrete political community.

Ancient Greece consisted of a number of independent city-states, or *poleis*. The several *poleis* were linked through a common literary heritage centered on texts by Homer and Hesiod. Greek religion was polytheistic, and thus exempted from subordination to the will of a single transcendent deity; but because it was pan-Hellenic, Greek culture, like that of Israel if for different reasons, transcended the authority of any single political community. Its focus came to be centered on a transcendent normative order–not, again, that of divinely decreed laws, but of an order that philosophers like Plato and Aristotle came to articulate as an order of nature. Rather than placing divinity at so exalted a level it could be regarded as author of transcendent decrees, the Greeks brought gods down to their own level and made both gods and human subject to a binding order of nature that was normative (Parsons 1977: 110). The independence of the Athenian polis and of other Greek city-states of its time was ended by the Macedonian conquests of the 330s BCE, such that the philosophers no longer held the status and responsibility they enjoyed in an independent polis. Eventually, the intellectual center for Hellenic philosophy and science moved to Alexandria.

Emerging from both Jewish and Greek culture, then, were scholar classes–the rabbis and the philosophers–who due to external conquests could no longer affiliate with political structures of the sort that had been in place among pre-Exile Hebrews and 5th-century Greeks. In other societal contexts, however, those literati could become anchorage points for their relatively independent cultural traditions (Parsons 1966: 108). And the traditions they carried subordinated norms based on kinship, ethnie, place, and language to norms of a proto-universalistic character.

In all essentials, the case of Aksum fits this profile of seedbed societies. Like Jerusalem and Athens, conquests of outside powers eclipsed Aksum as a matrix for continued evolutionary development. Although almost no historical detail is available for the period of about five centuries following the collapse of Aksum, we can say with confidence that the Zagwe Kingdom at Lalibela represented a kind of societal continuity with Aksum. The Zagwe kings were accorded supernatural powers. Given the massive power involved in the construction of the monolithic cathedrals, they must have commanded vast human and material resources. The Zagwe churches represent continuity both with the designs of the stelae at Aksum and with the numerous rock-hewn churches across the land of Tigray. They retained the rectangular construction of churches, which would be abandoned for circular formations in the historic empire.

By contrast, the Ethiopian Empire centered in the Amhara region to the south can be said to have represented a kind of evolutionary jump. What triggered that leap was another intervention from the outside, the arrival in the late 6th century, of nine Monophysite monks, previously known as Syrians, but now thought to have come from other quarters as well, including Cappadocia, Armenia, Constantinople, and even Rome. Hagiographies of these "Nine Saints" celebrate their exceptional self-denial, courage, and perseverance (Henze 2000: 38). The *Tsadqan Debre* abandoned the attractions of the capital city to establish churches and monasteries in the countryside. These include a monastery high atop the amba of Debre Dammo, accessible only by rope, attributed to Abune Aregawi, and several other monasteries in the region of Tigray.

The monastic missionaries provided a cultural repertoire on which Christian Ethiopia would draw for a millennium and a half. They codified the ritual. They created a system of pentatonic modes for liturgical music. The translated the Bible and other sacred texts. They initiated the system of monastic orders, based on the rule of the 4th-century St. Pachomius from Egypt. They planted the roots of Monophysite doctrine so deeply that it would withstand the strenuous effort of delegations of Catholic missionaries a millennium later.

By the close of the Zagwe dynasty, seeds were ready to sprout in the fertile soil of a distant region. This happened thanks to the creation of a class of literati who carried the seeds of Judaeo-Christian culture into the Ethiopian interior until the state could be reborn on a different level of societal complexity. By the 13th century those seeds had been broadcast to the venerable monastic centers in Amhara and Shoa, Debre Istefanos and Debre Libanos, respectively. And the exceptional proselytizing teacher who founded Debre Libanos, Abune Tekle Haymanot, came to be revered throughout historic Ethiopia, possibly more than any particular king. And the independent authority of the clergy became deeply institutionalized, empowering them to criticize secular rulers at all levels through moral exhortation and threats of excommunication.

5. Aksum Following the Seedbed

Although Aksum no longer figured as the center of the Ethiopian polity after the Arab conquests along the Red Sea and the internal campaigns that racked the city around the 8th century, it continued to play a role in Ethiopia's political and religious life as a symbol. Just as Jewish Diasporans never forgot about Jerusalem, and European heirs of Hellenic culture never ceased to revere Athens as birthplace of precious legacies, so Aksum remained a place of deep devotion through the course of Ethiopian history.

Not only did the clergy of Aksum produce the script of *Kibre Negest*, but the city itself became romanticized throughout the kingdom. In writings often appended to the *Kibre Negest* Aksum was described as "royal throne of the kings of Zion, mother of all lands, pride of the entire universe, jewel of kings. . . . She was the second Jerusalem. Because of her grandeur and her immense glory, all the kings

are called Kings of Aksum, and the archbishops who came from Egypt are called archbishops of Aksum." It was to the Church of Saint Mary of Tsyon in Aksum, the holiest place in Ethiopian Christendom, that crowns of former emperors were sent for preservation. Although the headquarters of Amhara royalty usually stood far from Tigray, the Amhara elite long regarded Aksum as the right place for the coronation of kings. Royal chronicles record at least four Amhara monarchs–Zerʿa Yaʿiqob, Sersa Dingil, Susneyos, and Iyasu I–journeying to Aksum for the ceremony, and protocols describe the rites of coronation there in lavish detail (Levine 1974: 111-2).

Thanks to this continued remembrance of Aksum, Ethiopia could develop a sense of national community that transcended the limitations of mono-ethnic nations elsewhere in the world. Her achievement has escaped the notice of scholars who treat nationalism as a quintessentially modern political movement, yet one that first appeared in Western Europe in the 17th if not the 19th century (Levine 2004a).[7] Creating a supraethnic nation coupled with a code of law and a judicial system that spanned the vast country left Ethiopia poised to enter the world of modern nations. The reign of Emperor Haile Selassie advanced that entrance in many ways.

The chief obstacle to proceeding further to integrate all the regions under national rule was that, as in China and India, numerous primordial populations and structures could not be integrated adequately through the cultural patterns defined as ideal by the elite traditions, due largely to the geographically protected indigenous traditional cultures and their internal vitality, and the constantly growing strength of Ethiopia's Islamic culture centered at Harar. Haile Selassie's regime fell short by paying insufficient attention to, and often deliberately stifling, the expressive needs of many peoples who were not native Amharic-speakers or Christians–a vast problem that the short reign of *lij* Iyasu had hoped to address preemptively.

That integrative failure, however, was crucially fateful. It affected the succeeding half-century no less than his failure to take adequate steps for succession. As Parsons so clairvoyantly observed, residual problems of exclusion from the societal community inexorably generate – in Ethiopia as in the United States – ethnic or other particularistic revolts, based to some extent on objectively incorrect charges concerning the condition of the country's economy, polity, and moral order (Parsons 1977: 19; see also Geertz 1963 [1973]). By the time the post-*Derg* Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front came to power in 1991, grounded as it was on the *mehakeleñaw* (central) zone of the region of Tigray which includes Adwa and Aksum, some undertone of entitlement was imputed to those who came to direct the regime of the post-*Derg* era. Unable or unwilling to press the claims of a single united

7 Philip Gorski, who has perhaps gone furthest of any scholar in documenting the earliest appearance of modern nationalism–16 century Netherlands–ignores the fact that countries like Japan and Ethiopia had developed nationalist cultures centuries before their putative origins in Western Europe (Gorski 2000). This is particularly ironic in that Gorski's analysis posits a form he calls "Hebraic nationalism" as archetype for modern forms of nationalism, quite cognate with what Ethiopians accomplished with the Kibre Negest. (Levine 2004a: 2).

multiethnic country, however, the new rulers found the issue of inclusiveness of primordial collectivities in the societal community of Ethiopia so pressing that it overrode the importance of sustaining a viable societal community at the national level. Today, as significant elements of Ethiopia's elites come to appreciate the advice of the late Dr. Eshetu Chole (1992)–that efforts to redress the previous regimes of discrimination and neglect of diversity should not be accomplished at the expense of unifying national legacies–Ethiopia continues to wrestle with that age-old challenge.

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