

## Chapter III

### The Ethiopian Forces of Survival

To account for the protracted endurance of Ethiopia, the last chapter hinted at two requisites, namely, a system of power suited for defense and the sense of shouldering a mandate. Such a successful record, in addition to presupposing a robust and effective ability for self-defense, necessitates a leadership that feels entrusted with a mission. From a cursory examination of Ethiopian history, one can confidently surmise that, at least until the overthrow of the last emperor, Ethiopia survived for so long thanks to a system of power that was protective of survival and bearer of a mission. The system rested on three interacting pillars: the imperial throne, the church, and the nobility. Let us review their inner workings and interconnections.

#### State and Church

More often than not, scholars have passed contradictory judgments on the connection of the Ethiopian Church with the state and on its aptness in performing its duties. Concerning the issue of aptness, a too common accusation against the Ethiopian Church denounces its lack of missionary zeal, the ignorance of its priesthood, its deficiency in asceticism, and its extreme conservatism. According to some views, one explanation for these shortcomings is the close tie between the church and the state. The proof for this tie is the deep-seated interest of the church in the traditional landholding system, of which it was a great beneficiary, but at the expense of its autonomy vis-à-vis the state. Blaming the neglect of its religious duties on its complete dependence on the state, John Markakis goes to the extent of characterizing the church as an “appendage of the throne.”<sup>1</sup> Another illustration of dependency was the foreign origin of the head of the Ethiopian Church, the *Abuna*. Appointed by Alexandria—until the practice was abolished in 1948—the *Abuna* was an Egyptian and, as such, so alien to the local languages and customs of the Ethiopian Church that he could be no more than “the tool of the reigning king.”<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, some scholars maintain that the state was dependent on the church rather than the other way round. Patrick Gilkes, for instance, states that “theocracy is perhaps the best word to use in describing the imperial system. Religion was a major pre-occupation of the emperors and a main function for the throne was the support for the Church.”<sup>3</sup> In effect, no emperor, however powerful, has succeeded in keeping his throne while being in conflict with the Ethiopian Church. Recall the abdication of Emperor Susenyos following his conversion to Catholicism and the isolation of Emperor Tewodros subsequent to his quarrels with the church. According to many scholars, the loss of the church’s support was an important reason for Tewodros’s defeat at the hands of the British. The custom of inalienable imperial land grants to the church further substantiates the view making the Ethiopian state into an instrument of the church.

These antithetical views on the Ethiopian Church call for a more balanced approach.

Donald Levine provides such an approach when he defends the “reality of functional specialization in Christian Ethiopia” between the secular and the religious.<sup>4</sup> Levine begins by debunking the charge of incompetence against the Ethiopian Church. For him, nothing disproves better the charge than the resilience of the church against the continuous threat coming from formidable adversaries like Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. As to the functional differentiation, the organizational principle of the church was less centralized and authority more localized than those of the state. These “distinct bases of power and influence,” to the extent that they lessen hierarchical relations, were not conducive to political control.<sup>5</sup> This decentralized organization gave the church autonomy while not excluding close interactions with the state. The point is that these relations, however close and varied, could not be couched in terms of the one being the instrument of the other.

What is one to conclude from this debate? Compared to the two extreme positions, Levine’s approach seems to be a more reasonable one. However, too much emphasis on autonomy loses sight of the imperative of unity between state and church, which is a requirement inscribed in the *tewahdo* doctrine of the Ethiopian Church. *Tewahdo* means united as one, and so posits that both, the religious and the political, emanate from God. This oneness in God commands the achievement of unity in harmony. In other words, both the political and the religious come from and lead to God, not so much as the one serving the other, but as different and complementary functions. The harmony in unity being essential, none was supposed to absorb or supplant the other. The common divine origin ties the church to the state and summons the state to rule according to Christian principles, the most important one being the state’s cardinal responsibility to protect and strengthen the church. Neither the state could have secular goals of its own, nor the church purely spiritual objectives that would be indifferent to secular matters. It is this unity in harmony that made up the substance of the traditional Ethiopian nationalism.

### ***The Kibre Negest***

The injunction of harmonious unity was backed by a myth enshrined in the *Kibre Negest* (The Glory of Kings), a literary document essential to understand how power in Ethiopia leaned on a myth specifically contrived to merge the political and the religious. To quote Edward Ullendorff: “The *Kibre Negest* is not merely a literary work, but—as the Old Testament to the Hebrews or the Koran to the Arabs—it is the repository of Ethiopian national and religious feelings, perhaps the truest and most genuine expression of Abyssinian Christianity.”<sup>6</sup> The myth establishes the legitimacy of what is known as the Solomonic dynasty, which dynasty begins with Menelik I, who was the son of an encounter of an Ethiopian queen, Sheba or Makeda, with King Solomon of Israel. Menelik I became king and all subsequent Ethiopian emperors, with the exception of the Zagwe kings, are believed to descend from him and thus from King Solomon. The most important part of the myth announces God’s intention to shift His favoritism from Israel to Ethiopia. The intention was revealed to King Solomon himself in a dream in which he saw the sun that illuminated Israel “flew away to the country of Ethiopia, and it shone there with exceedingly great brightness forever, for it willed to dwell there.”<sup>7</sup> The sun that withdrew from Israel in order to shine forever over Ethiopia symbolizes Israel’s disfavor and Ethiopia’s promotion to the rank of the new elect of God. Of course, conversion to Christianity explains the announcement of the transfer of divine favoritism from “the sinful Israelites” to Ethiopians.<sup>8</sup>

The *Kibre Negest* fastened a religious belief to a secular component: it linked Christianity with a given territory, people, and emperorship. It is therefore a “national epic” in that “it defines the secular and religious foundation of Ethiopian nationhood.”<sup>9</sup> In depicting the traditional

Ethiopian nationhood in terms of the oneness and common destiny of the church and the state, the state acting as the guardian of the faith and the church consecrating the divine election of the people and its emperor, the *Kibre Negest* turned Orthodox Christianity into *the raison d'être* of a people and of its social and political system. Orthodox Christianity was everything, at once religion, culture, way of life, and polity. Though the Ethiopian authorship of the *Kibre Negest* has been contested in some circles and the Ethiopians themselves cannot support their claim of authorship with satisfactory evidence, the compelling fact is that they have lived the epic with their besieged Christianity. Their periodically self-imposed isolations, their resistance to Islam and other formidable beliefs, and the preservation of their faith in its pristine forms attest that the *Kibre Negest* was for Ethiopians a genuine experience and the canon through which they have construed their history, social organization, and national destiny.

It is important to note that, in making the election of the emperor a divine concern and responsibility, the *Kibre Negest* abstained from attaching the throne to a specific family lineage. The fact that the Ethiopian queen and King Solomon were not tied by a marriage bond, what else could it entail but the reluctance to institute the norm of hereditary succession to the throne? At first look, the notion of a Solomonic dynasty seems to establish rather than undermine the hereditary principle. In reality, the foreign Judaic element removes hereditary restrictions and institutes an open system allowing the entire Ethiopian elite to claim a Solomonic affiliation. So wide and inclusive a notion excludes practically no one. Emperor Tewodros was from Gondar, Yohannes from Tigray region, Menelik from Shoa, yet all claimed to belong to the Solomonic line. In referring the dynasty to a remote origin that excluded no one, the notion conveys, more than anything, an ideological commitment to Ethiopian unity, that is, to the harmonious union between the political and the religious. In thus promoting more of a nationalistic notion than a hereditary or an exclusive royal bloodline, it instituted a competitive system that is open to all. The openness, in turn, squared with the logical requirement of the idea of divine election. Indeed, the invalidation of hereditary and other forms of established succession simply acknowledged two interrelated implications: (1) God's choice, being mysterious, could fall on anybody; (2) it would not be an election if it excluded other potential candidates. Exclusion on grounds of ethnic and family differences were thus set aside, and this could not but stimulate individual ambitions.

This is not to say that sons of kings did not become kings, but rather that their entitlement must agree with God's choice, the two manifestations of which are distinction in martial leadership, necessary to protect Ethiopia, and the authentication of the church. The latter could play the role of authenticator only if it remained a national institution that transcended localism and ethnic references. Thanks to its national character, the church's certification of a given emperor "provided the unifying elements which continually countered the centrifugal forces of geography, tribalism and aristocracy."<sup>10</sup> The national acceptance of the church thus endowed the throne with an aura of transcendence. Reflecting on this marriage of open competition with transcendence, Margery Perham writes:

The power of the monarchy may be visualized as a magnificent and lofty throne which was always standing ready for the dynast who had the military power and ability to climb up into it. The religious character of the throne insured that it would never be pulled down by so religious a people as the Ethiopians, and whenever a ruler was able, as many were, to mount all the steps that lead to the high seat of power he would find no theoretical limits to its exercise.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, Haile Selassie's Constitution of 1931 was the first attempt to establish a hereditary monarchy in Ethiopia. In the name of modernization and for the purpose of peaceful succession, the constitution stipulated that “the Imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the line of His Majesty Haile Selassie 1<sup>st</sup>” and that “the Throne and the crown of the Empire shall be transmitted to the descendants of the Emperor pursuant to the law of the Imperial House.”<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, the clause aroused vigorous protests from members of the nobility on the ground that it constituted a dangerous deviation from the Solomonic tradition.

## **Imperial Power and Regionalism**

The examination of the relationship between the monarchy and regionalism further clarifies the founding role of the *Kibre Negest*. The usual tendency is to conceptualize them as opposing forces, less so as composing by their very opposition a structure, a gravitational force holding the country together. Regionalism is accused of having retarded, or else obstructed, the full realization of political unity and national consciousness. In point of fact, the title of Ethiopian emperors as “king of kings” seems to confirm the impression that emperors ruled over “an agglomeration of petty kingdoms.”<sup>13</sup> Regionalism is also blamed for having fostered “parochial sentiments and narrow identities” based on tribal and linguistic demarcations that are constantly at odds with national unity.<sup>14</sup> Because emperors had to impose their authority by force, the outcome was constant wars and devastations, which, in addition to hindering the development of the country, repeatedly exposed it to external invasions.

Despite a semblance of truth, this understanding of regionalism fails to answer the fundamental question about Ethiopia. If regionalism had really such disastrous consequences, if it were so opposed to national life and political stability, how comes it, then, that the centripetal forces were strong enough to keep the country together for so long? If so deeply-rooted a tendency toward political fragmentation existed, the long survival of Ethiopia becomes nothing short of a miracle. The objection does not imply that the description of Ethiopian history as the perpetual struggle between centripetal and centrifugal forces is flatly wrong. Instead, it points out the need for an approach that shows how the struggle brought off the preservation of unity.

To understand the relationships between the center and the regions, we have first to define the functions of the regional nobility within the imperial system. According to Tadesse Tamrat, emperors expected two main services from the regional nobility:

the collection and submission of the king's tributes accruing from the region, and the readiness to contribute an adequate fighting force to the king's army during a national crisis or to send contingents against local rebellions in the name of the king when called upon to do so.<sup>15</sup>

In return for their services, emperors guaranteed local leaders the “full possession of their traditional right of leadership.”<sup>16</sup> Granted the right to leadership in exchange for rendered services, Tadesse’s explanation still overlooks that the right to collect tributes presupposes the enforcement of the imperial system. In other words, regional leaders derived the right to collect tributes and eventually to retain their own share from the prior incorporation of regions into the imperial power system. The traditional right to leadership looked very much like a right granted by the imperial rule.

We thus arrive at a crucial point: far from preceding and challenging imperial power, the

nobility was itself a product of the imperial system. Neither its economic interest nor its social status had any foundation outside the imperial order. In short, nobility is not so much an inborn right embedded in the regional community as an imperial nomination, in the same way as emperorship is a divine nomination. An overview of the traditional pattern of landholding in Ethiopia confirms the standing of the nobility. The communal type of land ownership inherent in the *rist* system (see next paragraph for further explanation) posits the right of the nobility as a supervenient or superstructural due. The tribute right supporting the nobility was superimposed on a communal order rather than emanating from it, as shown with more details in the next paragraph. This fact, in turn, explains why in traditional Ethiopia the title of nobility did not evolve into a hereditary rank. Without denying the incessant effort of the nobility to change its status into an inherited one and the effective existence of entrenched noble families, the bare truth is that a hereditary status was more of a claim, an aspiration than a settled reality. The counterforces preventing the evolution into a hereditary nobility were the peasant community and the monarchy. Both have never allowed the development of private ownership of land, which is necessary to change the nobility into a hereditary class. Except for its right to *rist* land as a member of the community, the nobility had only the tribute right granted by emperors. As Robert Hess rightly states, in Ethiopia “military rank and noble privilege were identical, and both came from the emperor.”<sup>17</sup>

This dependence on emperors meant that regional nobles had trouble asserting their authority if the monarch was a weak one. Troubles at the imperial level naturally entailed the rise of contenders within the establishment of regional power, and this announced a period of anarchy. A good illustration of regional anarchy is the Era of the Princes. For most scholars, the extreme weakness of the emperors of Gondar caused the instability and clashing rivalries of the Era of the Princes. All this attests to the fact that, in traditional Ethiopia, no person other than the emperor had direct power over another person. Any authority held by a person was a derivation of the imperial power, which in turn emanated from God. Outside this devolution, there was no legal power.

Does this mean that Ethiopian emperors had absolute power? The answer is no: in addition to the church’s prerogatives, the nobility acquired some propensity to limit the authority of the monarch. It did so by cultivating regionalism: unable to change its status into a hereditary one, the nobility stirred and fortified regional and ethnic loyalties wedding it to the community, as part of its endeavor to become a force to be reckoned with. Leaning on the peasantry with whom it maintained close kinship ties through descent group affiliation and the traditional system of landholding, it developed, alongside the national consciousness, narrow identities, battering on tribal, religious, linguistic particularities. To quote Gebru Tareke:

The physical remoteness of the monarch, combined with the nobility's embeddedness in the local economy and its strong cultural ties to the peasantry, allowed local barons to exert greater and direct influence on the latter and to limit the throne's authority and its intrusive tendencies<sup>18</sup>

This embeddedness had, however, another side: it was in the best interest of monarchs that local leaders strengthen their control over the peasantry. Only thus could the nobility properly assume the tasks of collecting taxes on a regular basis and mobilizing an adequate military force when called upon to do so. Clearly, the opposition between regions and the center needs a nuanced approach. In the context of traditional Ethiopia, regionalism was a force of stability and strength

as long as monarchs remained strong. In other words, the weaker the imperial power, the greater was the nobility's autonomy and, with it, the likelihood of regional anarchy.

### Fluctuating Hierarchy

It goes without saying that a thorough investigation into the reasons for the survival of Ethiopia cannot be conducted unless it closely probes into the manner the communal basis articulates with the imperial order. Without entering into the controversy of the applicability of the notion of feudalism or tributary system to traditional Ethiopia, it is safe to say that so lasting an endurance is hardly imaginable without the contribution of the traditional landholding system. When scholars study the traditional system of land tenure, they come up with two key words: *rist* and *gult*. According to John M. Cohen and Dov Weintraub,

*Rist* is the right to claim a share of land based on kinship to a historical ancestor held in common with other *rist* holders. . . . Those who can establish kinship through either parent may enter a claim to a share of the land in a unit from elders controlling the allocation of land.<sup>19</sup>

Based on descent rights, land under *rist* cannot be sold or exchanged, any more than it can be evoked to exclude claimants so long as a kinship tie is established. This does not mean that a person actually holds all the land claimed under *rist*. The size of actual holdings depends on the political means that claimants have at their disposal. Whatever the size, all *rist* lands are taxable. This turns the *rist* holder into a *gebar*, that is, into a payer of tribute. The tribute, be it noted, was "based upon land, not the person" so that the *gebar* was neither a serf nor a tenant: he worked for himself and his family.<sup>20</sup> It is the attachment of peasants to *rist* that deterred the aristocracy from achieving a hereditary status through the private ownership of land. However, this same attachment to the *rist* system infused Ethiopian politics with a strong ethnic coloration if for no other reason than because the reliance of land tenure on descent rights nourished provincialism. Kinship solidarity and parochialism were cultivated to protect *rist* rights.

As to the notion of *gult*, it was not a holding as such; it was the right to collect tributes. *Gult* "entitled its holder to receive from the *rist*-holding peasant the tribute assessed on the land, as well as labour service and various other perquisites."<sup>21</sup> The holding itself is the *rist* on which a tax due is grafted. As alluded earlier, tribute being an exclusive imperial prerogative, *gult* rights are rights that emperors bestow on persons and institutions to collect taxes and retain all or part of them for their own use. The grant of *gult* right was conditional on services rendered to the throne. Administrative, juridical, and most of all military services entitled persons and institutions to tribute right. *Gult* right thus created what could be called a distinct privileged class, but a class that remained dependent on political functions, and hence on imperial appointments. Slightly different was *rist-gult*: it was "an inheritable overright to tribute," granted to members of the royal family, high nobility, and the church.<sup>22</sup> Still, *rist-gult* was revocable in case of high treason and misconduct. Moreover, *rist-gult* would remain in the family on condition that a member of the family renews the record of distinguished services to the throne.

Assessing the contribution of the landholding system to survival is to show that the nationalist ideology would not have preserved its strength had it not been underpinned by the socio-economic basis. One thing is immediately clear: the *gult* system explains a salient aspect of Ethiopian defense power, namely, the ability to raise and mobilize a huge army, which is in line

with Ethiopia's preferred method of encirclement of the enemy. The *gult* system—that is, the surrender of parts of the state tax to regional leaders and through them to their local followers—established a sprawling system of recruitment and mobilization. The grant of *gult* had an outright military objective: it rewarded military contributions and instituted a form of continuous military service. As we said, failing to provide military service entailed the automatic removal of grants. Unsurprisingly, as a reward for military service, the *gult* system was bound to attract many ambitious and war-driven people, and this greatly increased the fighting ability of the combatants.

Another important consequence of the *gebar* system is the continuous expansion and consolidation of the empire. Grants of tax right paved the way for the integration of new conquered peoples into the empire, as opposed to the method of frequent raids into neighboring territories in search of booty (slaves, cattle, objects of prestige, etc.). The Ethiopian system was thus fraught with the need to expand: more *gult* rights entailed new conquests to integrate new peoples into the empire, since tributes emanated not from raids but from the administration of people. A major consequence follows: the system rid the ruling class of the need to look for surplus in trade, especially in long-distance trade. Already precarious by its very nature, long-distance trade became impractical for Ethiopia owing to its isolation following the expansion of Islam. The fact that the main source of surplus supporting the elite was not trade, but the tribute-ridden peasant production, meant the emergence of an elite class embedded in the system and eager to defend it. As the example of neighboring countries shows, had the Ethiopian elite relied on trade activities, conquest and conversion to Islam would have been inevitable.

Another outcome of the surrender of parts of the state tax to regional leaders and their local followers was that it connected individuals through a system of vertical authority, through what Levine calls “*hierarchical individualism*.”<sup>23</sup> The combination of hierarchy and individualism signifies that the domination-subordination relation takes the form of an association for mutual interests. Instead of polarizing the interests of the superior and the subordinate, the partnership makes them mutually dependent. Both intend to use their hierarchical connections to further their benefits. Since the reciprocal promotion of self-interest binds the superior and the subordinate, the relations are best understood in terms of patron-client or master-follower relationship than in terms of distinct classes with opposite interests. In particular, when the peasant is ready to offer military service to the lord, he can expect a great deal, including promotion to a political position, which is the path to increased economic returns. In short, the need to muster fighting forces has woven the entire system with networks of shared dependency.

All this testifies to the contribution of the fighting spirit of Ethiopians to the survival of Ethiopia. There is a general consensus on this point: the warlike values and spirit of Ethiopians are widely recognized and admired. Yet, little is the attempt to understand the source of this fighting spirit. What else could this source be but the vertical authority connecting leaders and followers? The tighter the bond, the higher is the combative mood, since their mutual interests depend on their ability to perform. Leaders' performance in combat determines the power of their authority, and this influences the willingness to follow leaders. War is therefore the test measuring the bond between leaders and followers. In other words, the fighting spirit was born of a social system that squarely associated position and material interests with warlike successes. In making warlike values the royal road to social mobility, the society secured a leadership hardened to war while also igniting the ambition of the most able individuals. This “tough-man system,” to use Perham expression, rested on the consensus that neither birth, nor servility, but military valor determined the social position of a person.<sup>24</sup> This is so true that, as stated earlier, military ranks converged with social positions in traditional Ethiopia.

Taken all together, the above features reveal the centrality of social mobility in the traditional system. A basic argument against the description of the traditional system as a feudal system is the absence, consequent to the inability of the nobility to grow into a hereditary class, of rigid class distinctions. As a matter of fact, the life of the nobility was precarious because it had to defend constantly its position. The social basis was so mobile that “the attributes of rank, privileges, honors, and duties were in constant flux,” thereby always prone to recast the destiny of individuals in all classes.<sup>25</sup> Because wars and warlike values decided the rise and fall of individuals and families, they were the indispensable avenue to social mobility. Examples abound of people of humble origin who rose to high positions of power, even to the highest, on account of military prowess. Thus, Tewodros and Yohannes, both fierce fighters, became emperors, even though they had no traceable link to the so-called Solomonic lineage. We can also cite the case of Ras Alula, Dejazmatch Balcha Abanefso, Fitewrari Habte Giorgis, Ras Gobena, and many more, all great warriors, who reached high positions of power without having any noble origins.

This open opportunity for social mobility had a direct bearing on the survival of Ethiopia. In his attempt to deal with the question of how Ethiopia did “manage to survive to modern times, when other local civilizations crumbled in the face of European imperialism,” Haggai Erlich discloses the central role of social mobility: “Ethiopia's strength and survival,” he says “stem from its unique internal sociopolitical flexibility, rather than from the attributes and behavior of foreigners.”<sup>26</sup> For him, by allowing a constant and intense power game, the flexibility of the sociopolitical order prevented revolutions, downgraded the politicization of ethnicity in favor of national unity, and provided able leadership. Indeed, both in promoting power struggle and avoiding the institutionalization of rigid stratifications, the system secured the consensus of all the actors, of those who aspired to power and those who had power. This consensus within the elite class as well as among aspiring individuals made the recourse to the overthrow of the class structure through political revolution unnecessary. Likewise, rather than politicizing their ethnic identities, ambitious individuals were spurred on by the prospect of participating in the power game and winning their due places. As to leadership quality, what better defense force could Ethiopia hope to have than the leadership of people tested in real combat?

### **Hunters of *Idil***

We have so far unraveled the politico-religious and socio-economic components that contributed to the survival of traditional Ethiopia. We have yet to indicate the spirit, the aspiration that dwells in and animates the components. The Ethiopians often designate this inner pulse by the word *idil*. English words such as chance, opportunity, fortune, fate, and destiny can translate it, though none of them exhausts its Ethiopian meaning. The source of the belief intertwines with the Ethiopian conception of God and the created world. In particular, *idil* is the cement that binds together the characteristics of social and individual lives. It corroborates the derivation of power from divine choice and sets the sociopolitical field as the stage of power game and the attendant social mobility.

For Ethiopians, there is a fundamental duality in the nature of God. Undoubtedly, “everything that happens reflects His active will,” but this will is not transparent, so that “Abyssinians view God above all as *mystery*.”<sup>27</sup> No direct, transparent correspondence exists between His will and the products of His will in the visible world. Because visible things hide or mask God's will, a special knowledge is required to decipher the truth by going beyond the apparent. It is in the nature of things that phenomena in the visible world cannot express the transcendent and boundless divine power without gravely distorting it. As a result of the immense



disparity between the created world and God, the language of God is not outwardly intelligible. Moreover, the tendency to appear independent and self-sufficient corrupts the visible world. This pretension to self-sufficiency instils deception and arrogance into the thinking and belief of human beings, and this further leads into the path of error and ignorance. The complete dependence on God and His mysteriousness turn every acquired thing into a mere gift, but even more so into a fleeting possession. Levine notes that the Amhara invoke *idil* “to account for the ups and downs of their lives,” that is, “to signify the working of God’s will insofar as it affects human purposes.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, everything is reversible and nothing is definitively acquired. To think otherwise is to be the victim of appearances and to forget who the master of all things is. All existing things, including living beings and persons, are not ends in and for themselves; they are by and for God. To know this is wisdom, which precisely avoids the sins of ignorance and arrogance.

This complete dependence of all things on God, whose will and methods remain mysterious, translates into a characteristic anxiety in each Ethiopian. The anxiety has to do with the question of knowing the fate allotted to each individual. Ethiopians call this concern *idil*, whose defining feature is that it is not so much an answer as a question, a quest, owing to the mysterious nature of God’s will. As an interrogation, it is the opposite of fatalism and resignation. It often unleashes the ambition that W. C. Plowden detected when he said: “Each [Ethiopian] man considers himself as born to great destinies, and the smallest spark sets fire to his ambition.”<sup>29</sup> We find here the secret of the reluctance to turn power into a hereditary right. Since power, at whatever level, is conceived as a divine gift stemming from an act of favoritism that always keeps its secret, it cannot be considered as a right inscribed in the blood, as a hereditary entitlement. Consequently, no belief better illustrates the thesis hailing social mobility as the central aspiration of Ethiopians than this notion of *idil*. For only through an open mobility could the society be responsive to the inner anxiety provoked by the uncertainty of fate. Posit a culture for which the destiny and place of individuals are anything but certain or fixed in advance, and the stage for power competition resulting in the renewal of elites is subsequently set. Likewise, the understanding that what God gives God can take away aligns with the competition. Emperor Tewodros knew this more than anybody else, since he is reported to have said: “I well know that God will raise whom He will and will cast down whom He will.”<sup>30</sup> This understanding also pervades the relationship between superiors and subordinates. Plowden notes:

If, on the morrow, by some freak of fortune not unfrequent, they should reverse positions . . . there is scarcely one of those who stand humbly to serve to-day, that would not to-morrow grace the seat of honour and issue his commands as well as his nobly-born master, who in his turn would find no awkwardness in handing the mead-horn or saddling the horse of his quondam domestic.<sup>31</sup>

Nothing expresses better the absolute dependence of things on God and the recurring opening of opportunity or *idil* than Ethiopia’s traditional understanding of time. For Ethiopians, time is not a continuous, cumulative process, augmenting by itself, acquiring consistency, and going somewhere, to some future, by some inner dynamism. Instead, time is the happening of reversals, of ups and downs in a cyclical fashion. It makes and unmakes the world without leading it to some progress or some planned goal. As such, its sole purpose is to manifest the power of God, and it does so by substituting recast for progressive movement. The recurrent cycle and the ups and downs keep reality in existence, but in such a way that they always manifest the power of God’s will. Being the power of birth and dissolution as well as of reversals of fortune, time is God’s

exclusive weapon. Here are some representative thoughts, taken from Kebede Mikael's poem titled "Everything Is Déjà vu," on the recasting and cyclical nature of time:

There is nothing new beneath the sun  
 The naïve person is constantly fooled  
 Is there anything that stays the same?  
 While that which you have put your trust in crumbles  
 The unplanned is found happening  
 The weak becomes strong while the powerful is humiliated  
 .....  
 When the rich becomes poor, the poor becomes wealthy  
 When one thing becomes murky, another clears up  
 The one who was sleepy wakes up  
 The warm becomes colder  
 The small is big, the big small  
 The bad is good, the good bad  
 It appears like a dream and passes like a shadow  
 The nature of this world is unpredictable  
 In the past, in the future, and today in this world  
 There's nothing new; everything is cyclical.<sup>32</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that traditional Ethiopians had little appetite for social utopia. For a culture that "attributes social position to one's capacity as well as to God or fate (*idil*)" and believes that these "last two forces [are] fused into one," as Markakis notes, the idea of perfecting the social system from below and through an autonomous initiative could only generate disorder and chaos by questioning the wisdom of God's allotments.<sup>33</sup>

To sum up, the backing of the social structure by the belief in the notion of *idil*, what else could it yield but a stronger survival will? The Ethiopians find in the social organization the proof of their inner and deep longing, the reflection of their greatest attachment. The social organization mirroring the belief and the belief the social organization, there occurs a mutual reinforcement. The equation of the defense of the social organization with the defense of faith and vice versa could only nurture an unwavering and fanatical attachment to the system. Notably, war was bound to become the royal road to upward mobility in a society open to power competition. It was the opportunity *par excellence*, the primary target of *idil*. Consequently, war became a motivation, even a vocation, a fact that Tadesse alluded to when, describing the relation of Ethiopians to war deeds, he spoke of "professional soldiers of fortune who had joined the court in search of wealth and adventure."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick J. Simoons, *Northwest Ethiopia* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Gilkes, *The Dying Lion* (London: Julian Friedmann Publishers LTD, 1975), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Donald N. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 122.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Ullendorff, *The Ethiopians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 144.

<sup>7</sup> Cited by Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), 406.

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- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.
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