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Book Review of Yonas Ashine Demissie, *Slaves of State, Intellectuals of development in Ethiopia,* Makerere Institute of Social Research, Copyright © 2022 Makerere Institute of Social Research. Printed by Chrome Partners, Nairobi, Kenya.

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General note on the book

Yonas Ashine's *Slaves of State, Intellectuals of Development: A Genealogy of Development in Ethiopia,* is a finely-crafted and beautifully written work, with a rich archival material that is well theorized. It mobilizes chronicles, newspapers, religious and literary works, memoires, novels and archival materials as ethnographic sites to study the Ethiopian state. The book's special interest lies in process and its use of events to understand broader historical processes and trends over the long past – the elements that distinguish this work from traditional historical works that tend to be organized around specific historical periods in Ethiopian history.

The central thesis and argument of the book

The central thesis of the book is that the pre-modern state and its mode of politics, its pastoral mode of rule as well as its notion of progress were key in shaping power relations of the developmentalist state in Ethiopia and impacted the nature of state developmentalisms in successive Ethiopian regimes in the 20th century. Yonas relates, "The book explores how the legacy of the geta-barya sacred and profane power relations shaped the modern political theology of state developmentalism known in Amharic as ləmatawi mängəśt. Developmentalism, I argue here, establishes a secularized theological and pastoral power relationship between the emperor as the midwife of development and the commoner as the object of

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salvational action by the emperor" (pp. 18-19). He uses the history of slavery in Ethiopia as a window to study development as "discourse of power." Development, Yonas argues, has been the central ethos of the modern Ethiopian state, whose mission was/and still is to bring about "gradual improvement of social conditions" (p. 19). Therefore, as much as it is a state project with an "economic agenda" (i.e. development as a "discourse of power") it is understood in this book as a mode of rule (p. 16, p. 146) where developmentalism represents a forceful, regulatory and patronizing intervention of the state to 'civilize' society.

In addition to its import in shaping developmentalisms in Ethiopia, Yonas's account of the *geta-barya* power relations in premodern Ethiopia, not only makes slavery central to state formation, but also resists the dominant narrative of the history of slavery that consigns slaves to a domestic space. Yonas critiques the study of slavery within the binary discourse of "domestic and chattel slavery" by taking Atlantic Slavery as the referent to construct the history of slavery elsewhere. He argues, in Ethiopia too, the history of slavery tends to be understood as "a story of domesticity and as a story of the marketplace," and does not receive more than a few paragraphs in the account of the Ethiopian past (p. 49). By using selected chronicles from the imperial Ethiopian past, for instance, Yonas documents the multiple subject positions that slaves held in past Ethiopian societies. He says, "the power relationships between emperors and elite slaves, for instance, had multiple power positions within the imperial power structure, [and operated] as power brokers, elite politicians and soldiers in the Ethiopian polity." Rather than socially and politically 'dead' subjects always holding servile positions in society, as the "property of the master," the heterogeneous subject positions of slaves meant that they had, sometimes "reciprocal relationships" with emperors or sovereigns (p. 67).

Yonas's use of Fernand Braudel's long durée and his application of genealogy to trace and examine the history of concepts as they travelled through the centuries gives his study of the Ethiopian past a rather peculiar form of writing history. This is mainly for two notable reasons. One is because it is a form of history writing that defies periodization. Two, it is a *history of the present* that seeks to trace the genealogy of a notion of progress that is carried over from the premodern into the modern. Along

with genealogy and longue durée, the ethnography of the state, and through it the story of political subjects, becomes another central concern of this work.

Contributions to scholarship

Yonas's *Slaves of State* situates state formation in Ethiopia in the African context, in addition to showing "the dialectical link between the politics of pre-modern state formation and the history of slavery and politics of *geta-barya* (master-slave) relations" (p. 14). This is a significant contribution for Ethiopian studies, whose insistence on Ethiopian exceptionalism (not to be mistaken with the local specificity of the history of Ethiopia) has but impoverished its scholarship.

This work is also a great addition to the scholarship on slavery. Yonas's very useful notion of "slaves of state" that refers to imperial armies in pre-modern and 20th century Ethiopia, similar to other premodern slave armies elsewhere, provides an empirically founded theory of slavery that concretely demonstrates the distinction between the subject formation of chattel slaves and slaves of state. This study and its inquiry could potentially have a conversation with the Afro-pessimism literature that makes use of Orlando Patterson's notion of "social death" to argue that chattel slaves, their descendants and even Black people that live about in this anti-black world, are "sentient" but politically "dead" subjects in an anti-black world[2]. The Afro-pessimist argument about slavery and blackness that is centred on a universalist definition of slavery and blackness from an Atlantic slavery vantage point is gaining credence at this moment through Black Lives Matter, decolonization, etc. Its implications can be countered by studies like this that document the specific histories of African peoples and their experiences of slavery.

When we come to state formation, Yonas's attempt to trace the genealogy of what he calls "the pastoral mode of rule" of the modern Ethiopian state into the premodern to understand state developmentalism in the 20thcentury offers a key

[2]See for instance Jared Sexton. (2016). Afro-pessimism: The unclear word. *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, 29. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e02

insight into what continued and what changed in the nature of the Ethiopian state in its long history. The book's attention to continuity complicates the largely assumed rupture between the premodern and the modern. Even if it has to be admitted that the premodern is too vast a historical period to talk about, Yonas seems to work towards tackling this problem by turning to Fernand Braudel's long durée to show and document the connections between the premodern and the modern.

As far as the issue of development and developmentalism is concerned, Yonas resists the dominant association of development as a state project with a mere "economic" agenda. This take makes *Slaves of State* a great example of what can be achieved by exploring the multiple expressions of state developmentalism. He shows that the politics of development is also about ordering the "social," "political" and "cultural" life of society. In such an approach to the study of state developmentalism, what is examined and achieved is not only the economic policies of the state, and its approaches to development, but also what state developmentalism does to politics. Moreover, Yonas underscores the top-down nature of state developmentalism in Ethiopia throughout the 20th century as well as in the contemporary moment. He says, in it "the masses were not considered—development was defined as a technical issue to be managed by experts—and official state developmentalism excluded pre-existing initiatives in the spirit of *serat*, *seletane* and *lemat*" (p. 214). The state is conceived in state developmentalisms of the post 1940s Ethiopia, as "the midwife of development" (p. 228).

The other key contribution of this work is its discussion of the role of intellectuals in the 20th century history of developmentalism in Ethiopia. Instead of seeing the role of intellectuals as "guardians of the tradition" or "pioneers of change," Yonas introduces the notion of vernacular intellectuals, whose principal role can be captured as "translating and articulating the popular into the political." The popular here could be understood as popular aspirations and concerns for development. Intellectuals in this schema are treated as "part of the speaking and creative subjects" of their society rather than their guardians or vanguards.

It is this conception of the role of intellectuals in society, as products of social forces and processes that takes Yonas to the discussion of what he

calls the "development communities" of the 1960s. By going beyond the binary understanding of politics as consent or resistance, in this discussion, Yonas gives us a remarkable account of the politics of the popular imaginations of development that were prompted by specific concerns, needs and interests. Yonas's discussion of "developmental communities" of the 1960s, focusing on the development associations of the Guraghe, Yifat, Tigray, Gondar, Wolayita and Mecha Tulema, is particularly gratifying as it foregrounds local attempts, aspirations and interests of development. It constructs the ways in which development associations emerged in the 1960s to articulate local demands, at times by challenging and resisting the top-down approaches of state developmentalism and its desire to totalize and depoliticize the masses. In Yonas's words these development communities "show how development can be organized and implemented from below, defying the representation of masses as helpless pawns of the development apparatus" (p. 246) ruled by local and foreign experts who come up with universalist prescriptions of what development is. This discussion represents a new history of developmentalism and highlights the legitimacy of popular developmental aspirations.

Questions, issues and possible areas of inquiry for future research

According to Yonas, an old Ethiopian notion of progress that is found in "popular imaginations… of living in the world as a political community and anticipation of the utopia of civil and secular political leadership, [as a] yet to be realized" aspiration (p. 15) was instrumental in "shaping [sic] the making of the modern Ethiopian state" as it impacted the nature of state developmentalism in Ethiopia (p. 15). For him it is this premodern idea or notion of "progress" that came to be united with the notion of "development" in modern Ethiopian politics. In addition to incorporating the old Ethiopian notion of "progress" to think about the diverse aspirations of developmentisms to show how that notion was carried over in modern state politics, I think one needs to add that the local circumstances in which state developmentalism has operated, and the local needs it was forced to negotiate with, needs to be seen as sites where a specific strand of state developmentalsim emerged. As there is no reason for us to assume that state developmentalisms (during the imperial, military and post 1991 periods) of

the Ethiopian state was not just a conduit through which a dominant and universalist discourse and practice of state developmentalism was implemented. It can thus be inferred that state development agendas and policies were also products of diverse circumstances. Specific contexts as much as popular developmental aspirations were a function of local interests, specific needs and concerns. This is to say, the aspirations of state development actors were conditioned not only by the global development apparatus, but also by spatio-temporally and locally determined economic imperatives and the social development status of the country and its peoples.

While noting that there is a continuity between the premodern idea of "progress and improvement" and the modern state developmentalism of the 20th century, it is also key to note that the notion of development as a state "project" and the educated elite is a new, and hence a "modern" phenomenon. This distinction between these two "periods" (the premodern and the modern) has to be made because "progress" in premodern Ethiopia did not involve any illusions of transforming society as a whole, according to a grand idea of development that is commanded and engineered from the top. Moreover, one must be cautious not to confine or limit the discussion of the pastoral and patronizing character of state developmentalism in the post 1940 Ethiopia, as a function of the premodern character and mode of rule of the state. In this period, the totalizing impulse of state developmentalism, also emanates from the technologies, machineries and capacities of the modern nation state. The authoritarian tendencies of the modern state to order society according to the interest of a dominant group have to be examined to understand the totalizing roots and impulses of the modern Ethiopian state. Hence, what is at stake here is not just recognizing the notion of progress that was carried over from the premodern state into the making of the modern state to grasp state developmentalism, but also the centralizing and authoritarian model of the "nation-state" that has become the reigning doxa in the 20th and 21st century of the world over. While in premodern Ethiopia progress was not an overarching world building project, in the modern Ethiopian state the concept of development has become, as Yonas rightly argues, "the ethos of the state" that is imbued with the goal of transforming society as a whole through a centrally directed

project of social development. The modern nation state's aim to re-organize society according to an idea or template of development is part of its technology of power to discipline the superfluous energies, creativities, potentialities and the heterogenous aspirations of society. Posing over this unique character of the modern nation state as an authoritarian agent of order and control is key to apprehending state developmentalism in our contemporary moment. For instance, Emperor Haile Selassie was projected as the midwife of development, "The creator of an era" or the bringer of "Modern civilization" by the imperial propaganda machine in the postwar period. This is perhaps better seen as more akin to the modern notion of the vanguard (the privileged agent of change) as the key spreader of social, political and cultural transformation of society. It is not just by coincidence that we do not find such definitions of kings or emperors in the premodern period. This is because the conditions of possibility for imperial autocracy in 20th century Ethiopia emerged in the postwar period and that imperial autocracy, as a phenomenon, became perceptible only in the post 1940s. The assimilationist impulse, as well as the totalizing and hegemonic character of state developmentalism in this period were better realized by the resources it held, both discursive (such as the expansion of the modern media) and technocratic (such as the bureaucracy) to centralize and implement its development agendas.

Yonas underscores that by using a "template" of development seen through "the lens of the pastoral mode of power" state developmentalism in imperial Ethiopia sought to totalize and depoliticize. He suggests, the Ethiopian state during the imperial era, and presumably under the Derg and the EPRDF, represents failures in the ways in which development becomes a "mode of rule" that has stifled popular aspirations of development and democratic life[3]. The question that comes to mind in this connection is whether developmentalism in post-revolutionary Ethiopia, represented just a failure. One wonders whether we need to also take stoke of the achievements of state development agendas in this period. One aspect in this regard is the recognition of land as a socialized domain and the national

[3] See for instance discussion in pp. 210-211.

question as a key democratic question of autonomy that has obtained prominence. It is true that it cannot be maintained that land has become a shared public property in the post revolution period and that the 'national question' has been resolved in the post EPRDF era, as the EPRDF once claimed. However, at the same time, the economic, political and democratic legitimacy of the land question as well as the struggle for ethnic justice, has been established as key democratic ideals to politicize society and organize the Ethiopian state. This relationship between the achievements of popular struggles for the democratization of land and ethno-national justice since 1974, and development aspirations, needs to be further examined by scholars and others in future inquires.

The other related issue that can be raised in this connection is whether the modern roots of state developmentalism in post revolution Ethiopia was just a mere extension of colonial developmentalism and the apparatus of global development and its logic of catching up with Euro America. To my mind, state developmentalism in this context was also an attempt at carving out a third world ideology of development that sought to find a niche for policy autonomy. In this specific setting, state developmentalism developed and articulated as a challenge against the prescriptions of the Briton Woods and Washington consensus design of development for the third world. The idea of the "activist state, "advocated by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi[4], was for instance sought to achieve national policy autonomy by rethinking the role of the state in Africa as an organ that marshals resources to develop key productive forces by engaging in massive infrastructural projects such as energy and telecom development, to bring about fast economic growth. This is an aspect that needs to be looked into to understand the circumstances state developmentalism in the 21st century arises from. This strand of state developmentalism was neither an attempt at establishing a 'high modernist' state by instituting a "command economy" nor a capitalist development through the empowerment of the private sector. Rather, it sought to secure and mobilize

[4]This insight is obtained from a reading of a dissertation in progress on the Developmental State in the post 1991 period by Seife Ayalew Asfaw, George Mason University.

foreign funding and domestic resources to make the state a significant and key player in development practice.

The last issue I would like to raise is a theoretical one. How the long durée and genealogy as approaches and methods of writing history are made compatible is not discussed in the book. This might be one of the areas that Yonas might want to consider to further reflecting on since such an attempt could provide insight for those of us interested in the theory of history writing. As it is, in the book, the long durée approach to the study of the long past, and genealogy through the examination of the history of concepts, are simply used without questioning whether these two approaches are compatible. This takes us to Yonas' approach to the study of the past—the Foucauldian method of "effective history" or the "history of the present." While it is important and necessary to question the ability of professional history to understand a past, or the past in its 'totality', it is also necessary to pay serious attention to one of the critiques levied upon "effective history" as a method of studying the past. This approach to history is accused of selectively picking and choosing what is essential from the past to advance an argument and conclusion about the present. I believe, the issue here is not to privilege or discard one approach to the study of the past over the other. What is beneficial is to make these approaches in conversation with one another to improve their shortcomings to enable us to examine the past and its relationships with the present.

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