

Development Thinking and Policy in Ethiopia from the Turn of the 20th Century to the 1960s

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That Ethiopia was not colonized is a well-known fact; but what is not so well-known is the consequence that this had on the trajectories the country passed through. For instance, this unique history had an impact on the country's development thinking, which gave it different features from the prevalent thinking in the rest of formerly colonized Africa. The first truly development thinker of the country, Gebre Heywet Baykedagn, published his article in 1912 and then finished a manuscript of a book that was posthumously published in 1925. In it, he explored the ways Ethiopia should follow to transform itself at a faster tempo and in a sustained manner. He argued very strongly against the dangers of economic dependency on a country of the north in terms that overshadowed the dependency theories of the 1960s and 70s. He argued in favour of encouraging exports. He advocated the need to build a strong and efficient state that would serve as an efficient instrument of development in addition to ensuring Ethiopia's sovereignty in an epoch when colonizing an independent African kingdom was a normal recommendation. His two works were written in Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, for which reason he remained unknown among the intellectuals of the rest of the continent.

For the next three decades after Gebre Heywet, a number of intellectuals pondered the question of social and economic transformation. These intellectuals were educated in traditional Ethiopian schools and in modern schools. The central concept around which they organised their thinking was the Amharic equivalent of "civilization" – therefore, the central question of their writings was how to civilize.

The intellectuals of late colonialism in the rest of black Africa focused on an entirely different set of questions – does Africa have its own civilization, the equality of blacks with whites, Pan-Africanism and the liberation of the continent or (in Francophone Africa) ideas associated with the negritude movement. Issues of development were raised; but within the framework of the broad topics of Pan-Africanism, negritude or the emancipation of blacks. In the writings of Ethiopian intellectuals, these major and overarching "isms" were completely missing.

This peculiar character of Ethiopian intellectual thinking radically changed as of the middle fifties when young people (mainly men) returned from European and American universities where they acquired a black consciousness, where they adopted Pan-African or negritude thinking, and where they acquired a good knowledge of the new development economics that were developed by Lewis and others in the north. Thus, their writings acquired the features of standard African intellectual writing on development.

In this paper, I flesh out these ideas by analysing the works of different Ethiopian thinkers over the three decades from 1925 to the 1960s and I will attempt to show how these ideas impacted on policy.

