

Return to the Source: Aleqa Asres Yenesew and the West

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Opening Remarks

I originally intended to send this paper to a professional journal. I changed my mind because its message deserves to be read by a wider public. And since the best way to reach a wider public is through the Web, I sent the paper to popular Ethiopian websites without altering its academic form and diluting its contents, except for some theoretical ramifications.

In many ways, the ideas that Aleqa Aseres Yenesew develops in the book that I am analyzing directly deal with the problems that Ethiopia and Ethiopian society face today. The book is highly interesting because it suggests that the mess we are in now has its seed in the adoption of a wrong educational policy since the end of the Italian war. Asres proposes solutions in which he discloses the elementary fact that the heritage of a legacy and the assumption of a common destiny define a nation rather than its ethnic or linguistic oneness. He shows this in his defense of Ge'ez language: for him, this Tigrean legacy is the essence of Ethiopian identity. Consequently, what makes you Ethiopian is less your identity as Amhara (he himself is an Amhara of Gojjam) than the heritage of Ge'ez legacy. Unity lies in the acceptance of a common heritage and destiny.

But what about the southern peoples of Ethiopia who do not trace their identity back to Ge'ez? Here Asres advances a bold assertion by questioning the Western qualification of Ge'ez as a Semitic language that invaders from South Arabia brought with them. He emphatically argues that Ethiopians are black and that Ge'ez is an African language. For him, the Semitic thesis is a Western machination intended to create a divide between northern and southern Ethiopia. The direction of history is clear: the torch of Ge'ez—which is then an idea, a divine mission, and not an ethnic identity—must pass to southern peoples. And it cannot do so unless Ethiopians present themselves as the descendants of Ham.

*The objection that Asres's reasoning lacks scientific credibility because it is filled with biblical references and argumentations would miss the important point that what matters in this case is not that facts justify the discourse, but whether the discourse is empowering, whether it organizes the world in such a way that it gives us strength, unity, and historical destiny. Besides, one can take away the biblical content and only retain the logic of national unity and empowerment. When I wrote my book, *Survival and Modernization*, I was not even remotely aware of Asres's works. Yet what a delightful surprise when I discovered that many of my findings reproduce Asres's thought! I take this opportunity to thank Aleme Tadesse for introducing me to Asres's writings.*

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Introduction

The opposition of traditional scholars to the proliferation of modern schools is a fact known to all those who are familiar with the difficult beginning of Ethiopia's modernization. Besides the opposition of the nobility and the church hierarchy, traditional scholars known as debtera had used all their influence to convince the country of the perilous nature of Western education. Emperor Haile Selassie and those who supported him often had to battle energetically to neutralize their opposition. To the youngsters sent to Western schools before and soon after the Italian invasion of 1935, the opposition of the debtera appeared as a pathetic attempt to stop what was unstoppable, namely, the march of the long-awaited modernization of Ethiopia. They easily figured out that the debtera's ignorance of the modern world and the anger against the loss of their traditional influence aroused the resistance. To them, the defense of the traditional schooling betrayed the most stubborn form of traditionalism, which was nothing else but a wrong-headed endeavor to shield Ethiopia from the benefits of modernization in the name of tradition and the status quo.

In retrospect, the judgment of the early students appears misplaced and irresponsible. True, the debtera had a major weakness, which was that they opposed Western schools without suggesting any other alternative. They were totally unable to tell how Ethiopia could modernize without adopting Western rationality, science, and technology, the very virtues that the traditional knowledge had, if not condemned, at least ignored. More yet, the debtera did not seem to understand how necessary modernization was for the maintenance of Ethiopia's independence. Especially after the dreadful episode of the Italian occupation, which made palpable the dependence of Ethiopia's survival on rapid modernization, the defense of traditionalism could not be characterized as nothing other than foolish blindness.

Granted these legitimate criticisms, granted also that traditionalism was incompatible with survival, the fact remains that the condemnation of the opposition of the debtera was singularly one-sided and hardly clever. Notably, it missed the core message of the opposition, to wit, that the zeal to appropriate Western knowledge and know-how may result in the loss of the very independence that it wants to protect.

Such is the vigorous message that emanates from one of Asres Yenesew's books titled *Useful Advice*. Asres—a senior cleric and a leading scholar of the Ethiopian Church—lived at a time when Haile Selassie was forcefully pushing for the spread of modern education to the detriment of traditional schools. Undoubtedly, Asres was traditionalist with all the fibers of his soul. For instance, he literally accepted the biblical story of the creation of man and the Earth and, as we shall see, his arguments are often biblical. He believed in the magical power of certain plants against devilish forces. What cannot be taken away from him, however, was that the need to benefit and empower Ethiopia fully inspired his traditionalism. He was sincerely convinced that

the best weapon against the marginalization of Ethiopia by Western powers was the revival of some core traditional beliefs.

The Traditional Intellectual

Written with essentially children and youngsters in mind, Asres's *Useful Advice* contains, as the title indicates, analyses of some dangerous developments and recommendations on how to neutralize them, all drawn from the stock of traditional beliefs. It is a defense of tradition, but less to shield tradition against external contaminations than to present it as the best antidote against ominous developments. It is a plea for a return to the source in the face of dangerous trends. Explaining why he wrote the book, Asres alludes to his concern about what he saw and observed and his "obligation to present his reflections to the public." His attempt to counter threats leads him not only to defend tradition, but also to reveal the deep meanings of some of its beliefs, which meanings appear today quite revolutionary in light of the extensive endeavor to denounce Eurocentrism and weaken its grip on third-world intellectual productions.

In direct connection with his felt obligation to write, Asres underlines the social function of intellectuals and writers. He compares the writer to an army intelligence officer: a people without intellectuals are unable to protect themselves, just as "an army without intelligence is likely to surrender to the enemy before it undertakes anything." To make the parallel clearer, he adds that a people without intellectuals are like a bee that is unable to find flowers: "just as a bee cannot make honey unless it absorbs the nectar of flowers, so too a people without intellectuals cannot achieve knowledge, diligence, and progress."

This definition of the intellectual places Ethiopia in an obvious context of threat and war. Intellectuals are the scouts or the outposts of their society, and as such responsible for scrutinizing the surrounding world. Interestingly, the allusion to flowers and bees seem to suggest that the author has no quarrel with the Western world, provided that Ethiopians are able to extract the nectar by separating the benefits of the modern world from its detriments. The responsibility of separating the good from the bad falls on intellectuals whose role is thus to filter external influences.

This exploratory role confirms that the great and vital function of intellectuals is to look after their society. What defines them is their national function, which compels them to rise above factions and special interests. While kings rule, warriors fight, peasants produce, priests pray, intellectuals reflect on what is good and bad; they represent the small but advanced garrison protecting the society from malefic and dissolving forces. Notice how Asres's view widely departs from the position of many Ethiopian intellectuals today whose ethnicization deprives them of any national stature by making them the representatives of particular groups. They are not the outpost of national unity and survival, but the launch pad of internal divisions and conflicts.

The characterization of intellectuals as scouts of their society says a lot about the traditional state of mind. It reveals the mentality of a society trapped in a hostile environment and compelled to be on a constant guard, not only against military invasions, but also against foreign ideas. To be sure, this definition of the intellectual must be related with the mission that the Ethiopian society assigned to itself. We know the mission to be the guardianship of the true faith, itself derived

from the belief that Ethiopians are God's chosen people. Some such mission requires that intellectuals assume the role of watchdog by protecting the society against ideological infiltrations damaging to the mission.

We see here a function of the traditional intellectual that is quite different from its modern understanding. Modern intellectuals are expected to examine critically their own society so as to remove obstacles to progress through the spread of enlightened ideas. Above all, nothing should hamper their critical investigation, which therefore constitutes their primary function. Not so with traditional Ethiopian intellectuals: their preoccupation is more with external threats, and at times with internal developments harmful to the religious mission, as when an Ethiopian king espouses a different religion. So defined, the task of intellectuals is never to question the mission, which exists only through the acceptance of the tradition that bequeaths it, but to defend the mission against external and internal enemies.

I hasten to add that traditional intellectuals are not devoid of critical mind but that their criticisms are directed against alien doctrines and dissident views. What is encouraged is self-defense, less so self-examination. Such an orientation does not mean that changes and improvements do not occur, since self-defense does not entirely exclude self-examination. You cannot efficiently defend yourself unless you agree to some corrections and refinements, even at times to some reinterpretations. Still, the movement is not dialectical in the Hegelian sense of the word where thesis and antithesis fight and move toward a synthesis. The defensive goal never ventures into an antithetical position; it simply focuses on improving the original belief without ever integrating opposition. It is more about improving, polishing the original belief than transforming or altering it.

A good example of refinements of belief is found in the various conflictual encounters of Christian churches with scientific discoveries. Every time science counters biblical statements, interpretations and refinements are provided that tone down the conflict. Thus, the story of God's creation of the world in seven days is made consonant with the theory of evolution through the suggestion that days should be taken as a symbolic expression, that actually they mean longer periods of time, perhaps millions of years. The belief is not challenged; it undergoes some improvements whereby it is made acceptable to a modern person.

In the same line, Asres's definition refers to the tradition of Ethiopian intellectuals entrusted with the mission of defending transmitted beliefs. They are not critics of the tradition; they are its guardians. As such, they enjoy great prestige and some autonomy, which is necessary for the defensive purpose. They are literally the lighthouses of society: the Ethiopian state is appropriately ready to defend itself and accomplish its mission only when the warnings of intellectuals guide the military mobilization of kings and their warriors against external and internal threats.

The Renegade Intellectual

After underlining the traditional role of intellectuals, Asres deals with what he considers as the greatest betrayal in Ethiopia's long history, that is, the transformation of the Westernized Ethiopian intellectual into an ally of the colonization of Ethiopia. In a statement that is most

revolutionary, he bluntly declares: “although Italy’s army was driven out, its politics was not.” In other words, the military defeat of the colonizer has not put an end to the colonial project. It has simply compelled Westerners to proceed cautiously and to use other more subtle means. Chief among such means of preserving their original design is modern schooling. That is why they were so eager to open schools and send teachers. What better means was there for realizing their colonial project than the propagation of their books and the creation of a Westernized Ethiopian elite?

So firmly convinced is Asres that the so-called modern intellectuals are but the instrument of Ethiopia’s colonization in default of military means that he asks: what else is their role but “to appropriate and expand what originates from the enemy and pass it on to youngsters?” As a result, Ethiopia faces the greatest danger of all time since those whose task was to provide protection now side with the enemy. When the patrols of the society turn into deserters, its defensive capacity is utterly shattered.

This ominous transformation occurred when the guardians of tradition turned into its critics under the instigation of Western teachers and books. Let us reflect for a moment on the magnitude of this transformation. To change intellectuals into turncoats, Western education had first to “denationalize their mind” by encouraging individualism and social ambition. In thus isolating them from the rest of the community and inducing frustration over their place in the social hierarchy, Western teachers changed them into rebels. Whereas the traditional intellectual completely endorsed the social hierarchy, mainly because he knew what justifies it, Westernized Ethiopians are essentially unhappy with it because they have been talked into thinking that the exposure to Western education alone should determine status and authority.

The first target of this rebellious mind is the traditional knowledge, especially the education of the Ge’ez language, which is now derogatorily labeled as “priestly education.” No better way could be found to instill contempt for the traditional system of education than to reduce Ge’ez to an education reserved for priests. To say so is to imply that Ge’ez is totally alien to the pursuit of real and useful knowledge so that it has no place in a modern world. Note that the exclusion of Ge’ez serves the social ambition of the Western educated elite, since the rejection of Ge’ez means that only those who can read Western books “find a place in governmental institutions.” The primacy given to the learning of foreign languages is evidence of denationalization. Speaking directly to youngsters, Asres says: though “to learn is first to master the mother tongue, you youngsters ally with expatriate teachers and refuse to learn your national language because you primarily seek social promotion.” There is no denying that young Ethiopians were persuaded to prefer foreign languages because of the prospect of better jobs in the modern sectors of the country.

Asres struggles to show that the contempt for Ge’ez and for traditional education does no more than deprive Ethiopians of the treasure of knowledge accumulated through centuries. To reject Ge’ez is “no less than to bury in the ground all of Ethiopia’s history and wealth.” For him, Ethiopian knowledge is like a hidden treasure; it is found in the monasteries and in Ge’ez. Unfortunately, because of the refusal to learn Ge’ez, this vital knowledge will remain hidden forever. Asres is such a fervent defender of Ge’ez that he criticizes those who say that we should “abolish Ge’ez and maintain only Amharic.” The thinking is that the preservation of Amharic

provides Ethiopia with a modern language that is also native while getting rid of the obsolete language of the church. Such reasoning overlooks the vast treasure of knowledge contained in books written in Ge'ez; it misses a fundamental truth, which is that "the source of wisdom is Ge'ez."

For Asres, Westernized Ethiopians may know many things about the West, but they are pretty ignorant when it comes to Ethiopia. In rejecting Ge'ez, they make themselves unable to understand Ethiopia and to use the treasure of accumulated knowledge to further its interests. All they can do is read Ethiopia through the lens of alien and borrowed concepts with the consequence that they come up with distorted notions. Far from being the scouts of the society, renegade intellectuals carry the viewpoint of the colonizer, and so replace real knowledge with critical declarations. Their so-called knowledge does not emanate from their society's history and defining features; it is made of normative pronouncements deploring the extent to which their society failed to develop the features of the model society, i.e., the Western society.

Messianic Destiny

The defense of Ge'ez through the suggestion that it contains priceless knowledge reveals Asres's approach, which is to counter the colonial project by providing Ethiopians with means drawn from the traditional knowledge. Only the return to tradition can protect Ethiopians from the dissolving ideology of Westerners. To orient young Ethiopians toward the quest of their abandoned legacy, Asres first defines what is meant by learning.

According to Asres, "the purpose of learning is knowledge; the purpose of knowledge is understanding. Understanding, in turn, reveals the marvels that the sovereignty of God prepares and accomplishes." Such an understanding procures wisdom: it makes us understand that God is the ultimate cause of everything and invites us to consider everything with "patience." The understanding that God is the cause of everything is essential to approach Ethiopian history and social organization. Nothing of Ethiopia's long history and survival is intelligible if we leave out its messianic destiny. The amazing survival of Ethiopia requires the following explanation:

"Ethiopia survived from the kingdom of Ham to today, that is, for 4800 years, without its flag being defeated and its script changed because it has been blessed by the prophecies of the holy prophets and has benefited of God's protection as the country where God's name is revered."

The long survival of Ethiopia in a hostile environment is nothing but a miracle. As such, it is not intelligible unless one understands that God has reserved a special meaning or destiny to Ethiopia.

This knowledge about Ethiopia is not taught in modern schools. In addition to being completely alien to the messianic fate of Ethiopia, the very idea of God granting Ethiopia with a special treatment is intolerable to Western teachers. The special destiny of Ethiopia belongs to the knowledge hidden in Ge'ez books, especially in the Bible written in Ge'ez. The latter is the only authentic Bible: unlike other versions, it alone reveals "the true mystery," and so must be preserved and carefully studied.

Supportive of the messianic destiny is the meaning of Ethiopia's social stratification. Asres notes that in Ethiopia all individuals harbor the desire to become "king or at least lord." Nevertheless, among all these individuals, "only the one chosen by God occupies the exclusive place of king

while the rest follows what their fate (idil) reserve for them.” What is meant by learning stands out here: learning leads to knowledge and knowledge gives us the understanding of God’s works. The social application of knowledge is that social stratification and the unequal status of individuals express God’s choice. To know this is wisdom in that one cognizes and accepts the place allotted to him/her by God. To be unhappy with one’s fate is both ignorance and a vain protest, since nothing can go against the will of God. No exceptional intelligence is necessary to understand the meaning of God’s promotion of individuals. Since God directly looks after Ethiopia, he makes kings and lords those individuals who have what is required to ensure the survival of Ethiopia. Those whom He has endowed with the best qualities occupy the various positions of leadership. Leadership, especially political leadership, is thus a divine assignment. Since those who run the state are chosen by God, and not by the people, Asres is far away from the modern idea of the accountability of the state to the people. For him, there cannot be a distinction between the state and the people; in his own words, “the state is the people. And the people are the state.” All the same, the intervention of divine election does not mean that kings and lords are above the people for the simple reason that, as we just saw, Asres identifies the state and the people. In so doing, he rules out the idea that the political elite has interests different from those of the people. “Unless the people prosper, banks cannot be established,” says Asres. Since leadership is a divine assignment, what we have in Ethiopia is the notion of leader as the shepherd who looks after the welfare of a people so dear to God. What must be added here is that leaders who mistreat the chosen people of God will arouse His wrath and very soon will feel His punishment.

The Blackness of Ethiopians

With a remarkable sense of consistency, Asres understands that his defense of Ge’ez depends on the certification that Ethiopians are both originally and authentically black. He vigorously disputes the idea that “Ham came to Africa after the fall of the walls of Babylon and the separation of languages,” for the idea intimates that “humans did not inhabit Africa” before the occurrence of said events. What is more, it originates Ge’ez from the separation of languages, thereby suggesting that it came from elsewhere and was not the original language of Ham in Africa. For Asres, Ge’ez is native of Africa; the origination took place “when Noah divided the world between his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.” He ascribes the wrong birth of Ge’ez to the malicious writings of Europeans and to all those who like to echo what Europeans say. In turning Ge’ez into a derivative language, these writings deny that it is a primary and authentic source of knowledge. Hence Asres’s categorical assertion: “Ethiopia has no rival in terms of ancientness of state independence, script, and literature.”

The importance of Asres’s statement emerges when we see how his position directly clashes with the prevailing idea about Ethiopia. Most historians, archeologists, and linguists attribute Aksumite civilization to Semitic immigrants from South Arabia, and so assert that the present inhabitants of the northern part of Ethiopia, namely, Tigreans and Amhara, are Semitic rather than black Africans. Accordingly, all what Aksum has accomplished and the greatness of its civilization, included the written language of Ge’ez, are duplications of South Arabian civilization. The racist underpinning of the assertion is not hard to establish: since Ethiopia had an ancient and advanced civilization, its originators, so argue Europeans, must be Semitic invaders from Arabia, obvious as it is that blacks are not capable of such a realization.

Concretely speaking, this means that Ethiopia moved to an advanced stage of civilization when Semitic invaders from South Arabia subdued the original black inhabitants known as the Agaw people. To quote an Ethiopian historian,

it is most likely that at the time of their earliest contact with the south Arabians the native people were in a primitive stage of material culture, and lived in small isolated clans or groups of clans with no state or political organizations. This must have given the immigrants an excellent opportunity to assert themselves and easily reduce the local population to a position of political vassalage.

Strongly defending the originality of Aksumite civilization, Asres writes: history attests that “Ethiopia reached where it is today, not thanks to borrowed things, but thanks to the wisdom and script inherited from the kingdom of Ham.” Granted that Asres’s arguments are biblical rather than scientific, the truth remains that he is dissatisfied because he considers the Semitic thesis as the product of European machination aimed at denying the paternity of a great civilization to Ethiopians. He sees no other way to defend the originality of Ge’ez and the knowledge it carries than to go against the prevailing thesis by rejecting the Semitization of Ethiopians. Only the defense of the original blackness of Ethiopians can protect them against the contamination of Semitic borrowings and hence salvage the authenticity of the messianic vocation of Ethiopia. If Ge’ez is not native of Africa, then it is a borrowed language with the consequence that it is not the primary source of what it reveals. When we note that most modern educated Tigrean and Amhara scholars and the members of the Ethiopian ruling elites endorse the Semitic thesis, Asres’s position appears as a remarkable dissenting voice, all the more so as his deep traditionalism should have pushed him toward the Semitic thesis.

Asres is so determined to defend the blackness of Ethiopians that he reproaches young Ethiopians who go to America for studies of distancing themselves from people because they are black. He asks: “Why do you push back your brothers? Why do you think that your lighter skin is superior to their blackness? In your eyes, you are the second-ranking whites. In so thinking, don’t you see that you are but ranking Ethiopians below the whites? If it is slavery that is bothering Ethiopians, Asres reminds them that “slavery did not start with black people.” White people too became slaves in the past every time they lost military battles. Slavery has nothing to do with being black or white; worse yet, to look down on black people is “to deride and anger God,” since blacks are His creatures.

Convinced of the need to hammer on the idea of the blackness of Ethiopians, Asres asks Ethiopians to remember that their famous Queen Makada (otherwise known as Sheba) was black. She proudly described herself to King Solomon as “a fine black person.” and as “more beautiful than all the sons of Israel.” Here an objection comes to mind: how does Makada’s story help confirm the blackness of Ethiopians when its main purpose is to justify the claim of Solomonic descent of Ethiopian kings? The objection overlooks the complexity of the story, notably that Makada’s pregnancy was unwanted and that it was decided by God, who thus wanted to shift His preference from the Israelites to Ethiopians. According to the Ethiopian story, Makada turned down King Solomon twice; the latter had to use the stratagem of spicy foods to compel her to sleep with him. Makada was, therefore, attracted by Solomon’s wisdom, not his person, and had it not been for God’s design, she would have persistently rejected his advances. The purity of

Ethiopian blackness was tarnished less by the desire of Semitic mixture on the part of Makada than by divine assignment.

Asres brings out the contagious divisiveness of European racism. Not only to demean black people is to ally with white people, but once the soul is infected with the influence of white racism, “first you look down on your friends, then on your country, and lastly on your father and mother.” Unmistakably, Asres warns here against the harmful influence that European racism had on northern Ethiopians and its negative effects on national unity and cohesion. By claiming a Semitic descent under the influence of European racism, northern Ethiopians cannot but feel above Ethiopia’s southern peoples, who do not claim such a descent. Equally divisive is the feeling of superiority on the basis of wealth, which is a replication of European type of class distinction. For Asres, such feelings originate from the “divisive propaganda of the enemy,” they make Ethiopians forget that “without unity there is no force, and without force there is no unity and pride.”

The mimicking of Western superiority is injurious to Ethiopian national unity because it presents what is but a recovery as a colonial conquest. Indeed, faithful to the pre-European writing of Ethiopian history, Asres sees Menilik’s southern expansion as a recovery of “lost provinces subsequent to Gran’s invasion.” Cut off from the political and cultural center, these lands underwent a characteristic deterioration, in particular in the use of technical devices, such the ox-ploughing technique. Asres is further inclined to speak of the southern expansion as a return to the mother land rather than as a new conquest since he believes that for many centuries all African peoples “were under one king and one flag.” Both on the basis of skin color and the legacy of common ancestry and history, Asres pleads for worldwide black solidarity in the defense of the black person.

This solidarity is all the more necessary as Asres sees a vast and protracted conspiracy to humiliate and subdue the black person. Incidentally, he makes the Arabs accomplices of the white conspiracy against black peoples. He backs the allegation by the role Arab merchants played in the selling of Africans to whites. This conspiracy against the black person has historical roots, as it is but revenge on the part of whites and Arabs. Indeed, citing the Bible, Asres maintains that in the past the “sons of Africa had conquered and despised northern white races,” so that the present racism against blacks is a payback for past mistreatments. Both the historical grudge and the racist mistreatments of the modern time clearly show that “the main purpose” of whites is “to divide, impoverish, and obfuscate Africa so as to rule over it.”

At first look, such plain accusations recall the position of the African scholar, Cheikh Anta Diop, who also alludes to a conspiracy stemming from the fact that the black person is “the very initiator of the ‘Western’ civilization flaunted before our eyes today.” However, noticeable differences quickly emerge. Diop establishes the pioneering role of blacks through the thesis that black people were directly responsible for the remarkable and original contributions of ancient Egypt while categorically rejecting the inputs of Aksum. In his eyes, “except for one obelisk and two pedestals of statues, nothing is found. The civilization of Axum, former capital of Ethiopia, is more a word than a reality attested by historical monuments.” Moreover, unlike Asres, Diop is of the opinion that Africans were so peaceful that they never showed the desire to conquer other

peoples, as demonstrated by the historical proof that “invasions often take place from north to south.”

Implanting Economic Dependency

The goal of impoverishing African countries is essentially manifested through the generation of a dependent economic system under the guise of modernization. Here transpires one of the major goals of the introduction and spread of Western education. By creating an elite enamored with Western taste and pattern of consumption, Western education, Asres maintains, undermines national production and economic self-sufficiency in favor of imported goods and techniques of production, the outcome of which is economic dependency. In a word, the objective of replacing traditional schools with modern schools is to change Ethiopia into a periphery of the West.

Unlike the traditional teaching, which provides the knowledge of Ethiopian resources, the external orientation of modern education has no concern for national wealth and resources. It simply teaches how to import techniques and goods at the expense of national means and resources. The so-called modernization has been nothing but the marginalization and neglect of all the techniques that Ethiopia had used so far to exploit its resources. Asres justifies his assertion by providing examples of neglected techniques and resources. For instance, consider the technique of making colors: “Ethiopia’s painters and writers did not work by importing colors from Europe.” They were using traditional techniques, which are now totally forgotten so that Ethiopia today imports colors from outside. Another example is perfumes: the Bible highly praises perfumes made in Ethiopia and exported to the rest of the world. Today Ethiopia imports European perfumes and the know-how is completely lost. Yet the ancient knowledge could be easily recuperated by reading old books written in Ge’ez. Hence Asres’s repeated advices to youngsters: “if you go back to Ge’ez, you will find similar wealth in great number.”

Asres multiplies examples by indicating how Ethiopia had advanced techniques for the use of wood and animal skins, which techniques are now entirely lost. The same with the crucial technique of blacksmith, which leads him to say: “Ethiopians fought against powerful enemies and defeated them by manufacturing themselves the spear, knife, sword . . . they needed. Unlike today, they did not import arms from outside.” At times Westerners have directly intervened and blocked the use of native resources in order to introduce their own products. For instance, “when the Italians occupied Ethiopia, they eliminated the plant known as gesho. They did so, not because they knew the hidden virtues of the plant, but because they wanted to introduce their own ingredients for alcoholic beverages.”

Asres mocks the naivety of Ethiopians when they think that Europeans will teach them the secrets of science. Because of this belief, many Ethiopians were sent to Europe for study and many foreign teachers hired at great expenses. However, all this effort has not produced “even 10 young Ethiopians capable of understanding the secrets of scientific work.” Asres reiterates his deep conviction by saying to young Ethiopians: “I want you to understand that European scientists will never reveal the wisdom of science to you.”

Let there be no misunderstanding: the warning against the European unwillingness to share scientific knowledge does not mean that Asres is against the attempt to import European know-how or that he is opposed to modernization. Rather, he asks Ethiopians to proceed in a smart way

in view of the European unwillingness to share knowledge. Instead of abruptly abandoning traditional techniques and resources, which only results in the loss of self-sufficiency in favor of dependency, Ethiopians should devise a smart policy of transition from the traditional to the modern. Accordingly, until modern industries are well established, Ethiopians should use traditional means and refrain from merely importing goods from outside. Likewise, instead of simply shutting down traditional schools, the best way is to educate a small amount of Ethiopians by hiring few foreign instructors. Once these Ethiopians graduate, they should be sent to the various provinces to educate other Ethiopians while foreign instructors are sent back to their country.

Some Critical Remarks

One thing is sure: Asres's book reveals far-reaching revolutionary ideas. Specifically, his analyses of the harmful impacts of Western education and economic penetration are both radical and highly insightful. So my criticism is not attempting to show the invalidity of his analyses, notwithstanding the fact that they appear excessive at times. Equally excessive is his high regard for tradition and the traditional system of education, not to mention the fact that some of his proposals are, if not irrelevant, at least unrealistic. These shortcomings, however, do not reduce the value of his analyses.

Much more serious seems to me Asres's inconsistencies, which strongly transpire in the complete lack of critical remarks vis-à-vis Emperor Haile Selassie and his regime. I know that a critical stand would have put his life in danger, but the fact remains that the book loses much of its revolutionary impact by not including a criticism of the imperial regime. After all, Haile Selassie has been the main instrument of the introduction of Western education and of the economic penetration of the West whose detrimental effects are analyzed with such a sharp insight. Surprising as it may sound, the book does not make the slightest allusion to the eminent role that Haile Selassie played in designing and applying a harmful policy of modernization.

Asres could not have missed that his acerbic criticisms of the modernizing process of Ethiopia extends to the initiator and patron of the process, to wit, Haile Selassie. Though the latter is the real culprit for the bad policy, Asres inconsistently put the blame on young Western educated Ethiopians. He repeatedly accuses them of being alienated and the prime instrument of the colonization of Ethiopia when they are but the products of Haile Selassie's modernizing scheme. His book attacks the outcome of a policy and exonerates the real agent of Ethiopia's derailment.

Another related inconsistency is that Asres's defense of tradition loses its fervor every time that he has to deal with the imperial regime. Take what is said about the role of *idil*, that is, of God's choice in the stratification of Ethiopian society. Asres asserts that each individual occupies the place assigned to him by God and that God's choice gives the highest positions to those He created with adequate abilities. This justification of social stratification implies that the present rulers of Ethiopia, including the emperor himself, are not living up to expectations, since Ethiopia is divested of its personality and reduces to the status of a periphery of the West. Clearly, Asres backs down from being a staunch defender of tradition to avoid a clash with the regime. Some such reversal is unfortunate, given that he could have condemned the regime in the name of tradition, which would have provided the best defense of tradition. In showing that the

present rulers of Ethiopia are traitors to the tradition of Ethiopia's independence and divine mission, he would have mobilized nationalist feelings in his defense of tradition.

In light of Asres's belief that the wisdom of God chooses the best leaders for Ethiopia, a basic condition for the implementation of God's choices is undoubtedly the absence of social barriers to the promotion of the most able. But if mediocre people and sellouts continue to rule because they are protected by privileges, Asres should denounce the obstruction, all the more vehemently that it is bound to bring disaster, which is God's punishment for going against His choices. Such a position could have been premonitory in view of the occurrence of the 1974 Revolution and the subsequent rise of the Derg, which brought about the decapitation of the traditional elite and plunged Ethiopia into untold sufferings and further deteriorations of its social cohesion and power.

That Asres's deep and first hand knowledge of tradition could miss that the notion of idil presupposes an open society is hardly believable. Idil posits a society allowing social mobility; it does not make sense in a society blocked by human-made privileges, such as the Ethiopian society under the imperial regime with its hereditary monarchy and nobility together with individual nobles possessing private property and using tenants in their land. These privileges constituted formidable social barriers and artificial impediments standing in the way of God's choices. Because of his reluctance to criticize the imperial regime, Asres thus misses the opportunity of demonstrating the value of tradition by showing how well the notion of idil fits into the modernizing goal. The demonstration of a connivance with modernity would have, in turn, advocated the return and consolidation of the traditional social mobility rather than its elimination.

Lastly, it is obvious that despite his rage against the West, Asres is not quite successful in combating its influence. In many ways, he agrees with the norms of the West. The agreement transpires frequently, as when he intimates that Ethiopia regressed because of Gran's invasion. The destructions caused by the invasion were so extensive that Ethiopians lost many of the technological advances that they had to the benefit of Europeans. In thus assigning similar technological goals to Ethiopians and Westerners, Asres gives up the opportunity of describing the Ethiopian civilization in terms of alternative civilization rather than in terms of a similar civilization that had regressed. Contrary to the notion of different or alternative civilization, the notion of regress confirms the idea of European superiority instead of challenging it.

Likewise, Asres's attempt to explain Western racism as a behavior induced by revenge leads him to say that blacks had dominated and mistreated white people in the past. The statement presents world history as a field of fierce competition between races impelled by similar goals. In so thinking, Asres is not analyzing different civilizations in terms of divergent aspirations and means, as did, for instance, the African revivalist school known as Negritude. Arguing that each culture has its own way of thinking as well as its own goals, the thinkers of Negritude reject Europeans' claim that they "were the only ones who had thought out a Civilization to the level and the dimension of University." The failure to particularize shows that Asres did not manage to think Western civilization and its achievements as a particular civilization among other equally valid civilizations. Instead, he endorses the normativeness of Western civilization by perceiving its aspirations, especially its technological goals, as universal aspirations, that is, aspirations

shared by all people regardless of their culture and race. Willy-nilly, this way of posing the problem puts the West in the driver seat of history, and so fails to question its colonizing goal.

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Notes

I translate the Amharic title “Tekami Mikre” as “Useful Advice.” I add that all the direct quotations from the book are my own translations, which are loose but accurate.
See Useful Advice (Addis Ababa: Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1958), p. 22

It would be undoubtedly very revealing to compare Asres with the early Westernized intellectuals of Ethiopia, such as Afework Gebre Yesus and Gebrehiwot Baykedagn. As a representative of the traditional scholar, Asres shares none of their views, which derive from the conviction that Ethiopia cannot modernize unless it throws away its traditional beliefs and values and unreservedly opens up to the West. Ethiopia’s failure to modernize may be due to the failure to reconcile these two divergent mental directions. For further reading, see Messay Kebede, “Gebrehiwot Baykedagn, Eurocentrism, and the Decentering of Ethiopia,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 36: 6 (July 2006), pp. 815-832

Asres, Useful Advice, p. 5.

See Messay Kebede, *Survival and Modernization—Ethiopia’s Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse* (Lawrenceville, .N.J.: The Red Sea Press Inc., 1999).
Asres, Useful Advice Ibid., p. 6.

For more discussion on this issue, see Messay Kebede, “Eurocentrism and Ethiopian Historiography: Deconstructing Semitization,” *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 1: 1 (Fall 2003), pp. 1-19

Taddesse Tamrat, *Church and State in Ethiopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 8.
Asres, Useful Advice, p. 20.

To read more on this issue, refer to Messay Kebede, *Survival and Modernization—Ethiopia’s Enigmatic Present: A Philosophical Discourse*.
Asres, Useful Advice, p. 63-58

Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974), p. xiv.

Diop, “African Cultural Unity,” *Présence Africaine*, 24–25 (1959), p. 71

See Asres, Useful Advice, p. 18.

Léopold S. Senghor, *Prose and Poetry*, trans. John Reed and Clive Wake (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 73

For further discussion on the idea of alternative civilizations, see Messay Kebede, *Africa's Quest for a Philosophy of Decolonization* (New York: Rodopi, 2004).