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EUNET WEBINAR REPORT

WRITING ETHIOPIA INTO THE WORLD, WRITING THE WORLD FROM ETHIOPIA

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The Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EUNET) hosted an online scholarly webinar on Friday, 30 January 2026, titled ‘Writing Ethiopia into the World and Writing the World from Ethiopia’. The webinar examined how Ethiopia has been represented within global knowledge production and how Ethiopian thinkers and political leaders have historically engaged with ideas beyond the country’s borders. The presentation explored the role of foreign scholars in shaping international understandings of Ethiopia while critically reflecting on the strengths and limitations of external perspectives in comparison with Ethiopian scholarship. It also considered how Ethiopian intellectual traditions and political projects have drawn on global ideas to inform paths of modernization.

The webinar was presented by Professor Emeritus Christopher Clapham of the University of Cambridge and moderated by Dr Asnake Kefale of Addis Ababa University. Drawing on decades of research and engagement with Ethiopia, the discussion generated strong participation and thoughtful questions from attendees. The session highlighted the importance of situating Ethiopian knowledge production within wider global debates while centring local intellectual contributions and historical experience. Below, we include the full text of Prof Clapham’s presentation. A recording of the webinar and discussion is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hMQ7fkqY3A>.

The webinar formed part of EUNET Writing Bootcamp II, a wider initiative that included a three-day writing retreat and open sessions aimed at strengthening scholarly writing and collaboration among Ethiopian women researchers.

Webinar presentation

Netsanet has asked me to speak to this title, which is far too ambitious to address in a single talk, but has left it to me to decide what I mean by it, so what I propose to explore in the first part of this talk is the question of how foreigners and also—necessarily—Ethiopians have tried to understand this quite remarkable part of the world, before going on in the second part to discuss what the world looks like from Ethiopia, and notably Ethiopian reactions to the world of ‘modernity’ into which they were thrust from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

Writing Ethiopia into the world

The place to start is with a disclaimer, which is that I feel that I myself have never succeeded in understanding Ethiopia, despite 60 years trying, and still see myself as the ignorant young *ferenj* who first visited Ethiopia in 1962 and then arrived at Bole Airport as a doctoral researcher in January 1964. Our first obligation is therefore to approach this task with the modesty that it requires.

For one thing, this is not only a part of the world of quite extraordinary complexity, comprising Muslims and Christians, agriculturalists and pastoralists, empires and kingdoms, but also peoples with no formal government structures at all, but also an intensely *contested* part of the world, in which what seems true and obvious to some of those who examine it, is bitterly rejected by others who take a very different approach to what counts as Ethiopia and what does not, and in which one person’s idea of Ethiopia’s ‘history’ is someone else’s mythology, or vested interest, or form of exploitation. This contestation is often most evident in the work of Ethiopian scholars, who are themselves part of the ‘reality’ that they are seeking to explain, but the same is often true of foreigners, who come to look at the country or region from the perspective of the area, geographical or disciplinary, that they study, or their own political sympathies and ideological inclinations. It is virtually impossible, for instance, to write a ‘neutral’ account of Eritrea.

Ethiopia has attracted an awareness from the rest of the world that is quite exceptional for anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa, and surpassed only by Egypt for Africa as a whole. This awareness originated in large measure from Ethiopia’s linkages to several of the world’s great religions, most obviously through Christianity, indicated by the mythology of Prester John, and in turn to Judaism, through the *Kebrä Negast* and the myth of Solomonic descent, as well as the Beta Israel (or Falasha), even though these are now regarded by many scholars not as Jewish, but as a heretical sect within Ethiopian Christianity. This has privileged a particular account of Ethiopia, sometimes identified as the ‘great tradition’, with its emphasis not just on the imperial Ethiopian state and its monuments in places such as Axum and Lalibela, but on features of the Ethiopian experience, characteristically in the northern highlands, that resonated most evidently with the European origins of those who studied it. In short, Ethiopia was *recognizable* to people from the outside world as akin to the political and social structures with which they were familiar in their own countries, as for example with the description of the northern highlands as ‘feudal’. But Ethiopia also has longstanding linkages with Islam, and the Prophet’s command for tolerance of Ethiopia in recognition of its protection of his earliest followers is still cited as a call for peaceful relations between the two faiths. There are likewise very substantial Muslim communities in much of what is now—since the nineteenth century expansion of the Ethiopian empire—part of the territory of Ethiopia itself.



Ethiopia has correspondingly attracted the interest of external scholars, going back to Job Ludolph, the seventeenth century German founder of the scholarly study of Ethiopia, whose *History of Ethiopia* was published in 1683. The earliest published map of Ethiopia of which I am aware was by the Flemish cartographer Ortelius (or Ortels), whose ‘Presbiteri Iohannis, sive Abissinorum Imperii Descriptio’ (Description of the Empire of Prester John or of the Abyssinians), appeared in the first atlas of the world, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, published in Antwerp in 1579. Inaccurate though this was (not until Ludolph’s map a century later was the course of the Abbay [Blue Nile] correctly placed), it showed how Ethiopia figured in the European imagination from the start of the modern era. It is also important to note that from the very earliest accounts, Ethiopians have been engaged in writing their own histories, which have been incorporated into European ones, led by Abba Gorgorios, the Ethiopian priest whose testimony provided a very large part of the original information on which Ludolph’s work was based, as was very fully acknowledged by Ludolph himself. The imperial chronicles and other works including Bahrey’s *History of the Galla (or Oromo)*, written in 1593, provide a corpus of indigenous historiography of a kind that is unavailable for any other part of sub-Saharan Africa.

It has sometimes been argued in recent times that accounts of Africa can only be written by indigenous Africans, in order to cleanse them of colonial fallacies and prejudices. This is an argument about which I am deeply sceptical, and which in any event does not apply to Ethiopia, which was not colonized (save for the brief Italian interlude of 1936-1941), and also has its own long record of scholarship. My own view, to place it on the record, is that anyone has the right to study anything, and no one, correspondingly, has the right to prohibit them from doing so, and the attempt is best regarded as an attempt to suppress any viewpoint that might challenge the often deeply biased accounts of people with their own axes to grind. Both indigenous scholars on the one hand, and external ones on the other, have their own strengths and weaknesses, which need to be combined for a full picture.

The advantage of indigenous scholarship lies especially in the instinctive recognition of insiders for the societies in which they have always lived, and for features that outsiders, coming fresh and ignorant to a very special part of the world, have to learn, if they can do so, through their own conscious efforts, while insiders also have a native-speaker’s grasp of languages of great sophistication whose nuances outsiders can find it very difficult to recognize. But it has to be recognized that there are weaknesses also in Ethiopians’ struggles to understand their own country, which have only increased in recent years as a result of the fragmentation of the domestic political scene, part of which certainly derives from the overdue recognition of issues and interests that have been suppressed or overlooked by the top-down imposition of official narratives that deny the legitimacy of any viewpoint that challenges their own, but which also leads to the denial of the multiple things that Ethiopians have in common: it is often all too easy for anyone reading an insider’s account of Ethiopia to recognize where its author comes from. I can only recommend as an antidote Bahru Zewde’s recent edited book, *Interdependence and Interactions in Ethiopian History*, which brings together a series of brief studies of the numerous ways in which, over a long period, different groups of Ethiopians have collaborated with one another.¹

Outsiders, seeking to write Ethiopia into the world that they know already, have their own corresponding strengths and weaknesses, of which the greatest advantage, in my view, lies in a capacity to achieve a certain detachment from the country’s internal controversies, though my no means all of them (or us) actually achieve it. Anthropologists in particular, many of whom have made outstanding contributions to the understanding of



Ethiopia's diverse peoples, are notorious for their 'my people' attachment to the groups that they study, while it has been difficult for those who have written about Eritrea not to sympathize with the Eritrean struggle, or to recognize its failure to make the transition from a 'liberation' movement fighting for independence from an admittedly brutal regime to the government of a state capable of providing its people with the benefits for which they had fought so long, so hard, and ultimately so unsuccessfully. The best book I know for understanding Eritrea is Richard Reid's *Shallow Graves*,² which illuminates the Eritrean mindset like no other. Outsiders, too, have an advantage when it comes to placing Ethiopia in comparative context – such as, for instance, why genuine social revolutions, of which Ethiopia has had one, almost invariably take place in ancient autocratic monarchies.

It is also, I think, worth noting a phenomenon that I would describe as 'academic inversion', by which all of us, insiders and outsiders alike, become obsessed by what we *don't know*. Outsiders have learnt about Western 'social science' in graduate school, much of it rubbish (at least for understanding Ethiopia), and then suddenly find themselves plunged into a country that is weird and fascinating, whereas insiders can easily take their own country for granted, and are eager instead to learn about 'theories' (usually drawn from North American 'social science') which they think hold the answers. As editor for 15 years of a leading journal in African studies, I was constantly frustrated by African scholars whose papers appeared to come from the literature reviews of their PhDs, when they only had to look out of their windows to see more interesting developments than all the social science jargon that they had painstakingly acquired. Two articles that I happily accepted which bucked this regrettable tendency were "The growth of religious cults on Nigerian university campuses"³ and "The impact of the mobile phone on relations between married couples in Addis Ababa",⁴ each of which could only have been written by Africans observing the world around them. So the one recommendation I would make to Ethiopian scholars seeking to place articles in global academic journals is to play to their own comparative advantage, and ask what they know that others don't.

Finally, in this section of my talk, I have constantly been touched by the respect (often undeserved) with which Ethiopians have treated foreigners who seek to "write Ethiopia", and was particularly moved that when Richard Pankhurst died, after a lifetime devoted to the study of Ethiopia, he was awarded the honour of a state funeral in Trinity Cathedral in Addis Ababa, attended by the President of Ethiopia and so many Ethiopians from all walks of life that the crowds, on foot, blocked the whole wide avenue leading to the cathedral. But when anyone describes me as an 'expert', or still worse an 'authority', on Ethiopia, I frankly curl up with embarrassment.

Writing the world into Ethiopia

I have also been asked to address the other side of the coin, which I take to mean the ways in which Ethiopia and Ethiopians have responded and adapted to the world in which they find themselves, first with the advent of colonialism elsewhere in Africa and then with the post-colonial world in which they were the odd one out. The answer to the first of these questions was most strikingly provided in emperor Menilek's famous circular to European powers, in which he said: "if powers at a distance come to divide Africa, I do not intend to remain an indifferent spectator". Nor did he: the great, late-nineteenth century expansion of the Ethiopian empire, which on the one hand preserved Ethiopia's independence from colonial rule, on the other hand saddled the country and its future governments with all the problems of managing ethnic, religious and socio-economic diversity in which it continues to be entangled.

This has led to a picture of northern highland Ethiopia as itself a ‘colonial’ power, though one of a very different kind from European colonialism, which carried both its advantages, such as the absence of a politics of race, and also its disadvantages, stemming from the lack of ‘development’ in the empire itself. One thing that astonished me when I arrived as an ignorant graduate student in 1964 was that many of the Ethiopian students to whom I spoke actually *regretted* that Ethiopia had *not* been colonized, but you only had to look at Ethiopia at that time, when students in particular felt that they were stuck with a divine right monarchy that they despised, while neighbouring ex-colonial African states were not only more ‘developed’ than them, but also had elected governments committed to radical transformation, of a kind that was blocked in Ethiopia by a regime that clung to its own vested interests, and to ways of thinking totally different from those of the newly emerging Africa. The balance between the pros and cons of colonialism on the one hand and ancient independent statehood on the other has changed since that time, with the tragic disappointments of much of post-colonial Africa and the revolution in Ethiopia, which had its own mixed legacies, notably of violence. But even more than 60 years after most of ex-colonial Africa gained independence, Ethiopia continues to be distinctively different from the rest of the continent. Perhaps the most important difference of all was that *external* rulers could up-sticks and go away, once colonialism had lost its own legitimacy, whereas *internal* ones remained an integral part of the domestic political scene, creating the very distinctive issue of ‘nationalities’ which Ethiopia has had to face.

Another critical feature of the Ethiopian encounter with the outside world has therefore been the way in which successive Ethiopian governments have attempted to turn the country into a ‘modern’ state, which sought to emulate what colonialists were doing elsewhere, while at the same time protecting the interests of the state and its rulers. The first of those rulers to have a conception of Ethiopia as a modern state was Tewodros, whose vision of a modernized Ethiopia was perfectly symbolized by his great cannon named Sebastopol, after the Crimean fortress intended to fight the same enemy, the British, on behalf of another Orthodox empire, Russia. Equally symbolically, it was never fired, and still remains on its hillside at Magdala as a memorial to its failure.

Altogether more successful was his eventual successor Menilek, who had a very shrewd understanding of the rapidly changing world in which he found himself, and adapted to it not just in military terms, expressed of course in his victory at Adwa, but also diplomatically, both in the lead-up to Adwa and after it, and likewise ideologically, in the adoption of Japan as the appropriate model for Ethiopia to emulate. This has been explored by Bahru Zewde in his book on the first Ethiopian intellectuals, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia*,⁵ and was to some extent taken over by Haile-Selassie in his 1931 Ethiopian constitution, which drew to a large extent on the 1889 Meiji constitution of Japan. And although Teferi/Haile-Selassie’s first attempt to incorporate Ethiopia into the modern global system through the League of Nations failed dismally in 1935, he was much more successful after WWII in adapting Ethiopia first to the Cold War, by placing Ethiopia under US protection (and thus distancing himself from the British), and most spectacularly by his amazing feat in placing Ethiopia at the head of a new Africa created by the independence movements and the collapse of colonialism, and symbolized by the May 1963 Addis Ababa heads of state summit (for which much of the credit lies with the then foreign minister Ketema Yifru), and the formation of the OAU [Organization of African Unity] with its headquarters in Addis Ababa.

But while Ethiopia was enormously successful *diplomatically* in adapting to the new Africa, it was quite unable to do so in other ways, because the model of modernity that was adopted even by the most conservative of post-colonial African states differed so sharply from that of a regime that was imperial in every way. Insofar



as that regime had any model of where it was looking to go, this was the British example of a constitutional monarchy, which for most Ethiopians was simply a non-starter, and the 1955 constitution, which in principle was intended to set this process going, actually made very little difference. In its place, the model of modernity that set the scene for Ethiopia's transformation was that provided by Marxism-Leninism, which achieved a level of ideological dominance that was quite exceptional in the whole of Africa, and drove 'the generation' that was to be in power from 1974 through to the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012. Marxism has of course been the default ideology for anyone who likes to see themselves as 'socialist' or 'left wing', and during the Cold War it had the potential to indicate sympathy with the USSR and opposition to imperialist states associated with colonialism. In most of Africa, however, Marxism was no more than cosmetic, as indicated by the 'Laxism-Beninism' as which it was ridiculed in Benin, or the 'Somali socialism' of Siyad Barre. In Ethiopia, by contrast, it was taken very seriously indeed – most of all by Meles Zenawi – to such an extent that 'writing the world from Ethiopia' essentially amounted to constructing the world in Marxist terms, in which alliance with the USSR certainly had a role, but which went much deeper than a simply instrumental objective, notably in search of the arms with which to fight the Derg's endless wars. Underlying this commitment, in my view at least, was the remarkable correspondence between the situation in Ethiopia and that in the Soviet Union or Russia. For a start, both were ancient monarchies whose religion was Orthodox Christianity, in which commitment to the faith and the state were closely linked. Once that monarchy was overthrown, as it was in 1917 and 1974, it was replaced by a Marxist-Leninist state that replicated the Orthodox one, in which traditions of statehood and nationalism were retained but relabelled so that the Orthodox hierarchy was replaced by the socialist party-state. Instead of the Orthodox priesthood, the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia now had the Workers' Party of Ethiopia; instead of the US alliance, it looked for protection to the Warsaw Pact; and its approach to the most critical issues facing the revolutionary party-state was guided by the solutions adopted in the Soviet Union.

This was notably the case with regard to the 'peasant question', in which the landlord class was destroyed, and land was nationalized, to be managed by peasants associations or cooperatives. Revolutionary Ethiopia's approach to the 'national question' was more problematic, given that Marxist orthodoxy sought to resolve the problem of ethnic diversity along the lines laid down by Stalin, in which it was taken for granted that ethnic identities were no more than a superstructural manifestation of underlying issues of class exploitation, with the corollary that if you removed the element of exploitation by a particular ethnic group, the role of ethnic identities would simply 'wither away'. The Derg was always sceptical about this doctrine, which clashed with its own commitment to an intensely centralized state, and it was only at the very end of its rule that it started to acknowledge it with the formation of the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities. But Meles was totally sold on it, not least because it promised to reconcile 'democratic centralism' with an autonomous status for Tigray and necessarily also other nationalities. I argued this case with Meles, who enjoyed confrontations with foreign intellectuals, but there was absolutely no shaking him, with the result that, weirdly, EPRDF Ethiopia came to adopt a federal system based on ethnicity at precisely the moment when the USSR, from which this model had been copied, was falling apart into the fifteen constituent union republics that continue to haunt it. In practice, therefore, the Soviet approach to the national question had life only after death: irrelevant so long as an all-powerful Communist Party remained in control, it provided the template for the country's dissolution once the Party collapsed.

The tragedy of the Ethiopian struggle for modernity has been that none of its models has worked, and that the Marxist model, which seemed best adapted to Ethiopia, and was pursued with a determination vastly greater than any of the others, has failed most disastrously of all, notably under the Derg, with an economic policy that led, or helped to lead, to famine, and a political formula derived from the Leninist party-state that resulted in constant warfare, in which the regime was ultimately overthrown by a combination of military defeat and the loss of domestic support. By far the most intelligent of Ethiopian rulers whom I have encountered over the space of some sixty years has been Meles Zenawi, who was the only one who had thought, while in opposition in the mountains of Tigray, about what to do if or when he came to power – in dramatic contrast to Isayas in Eritrea, who appears to have assumed that the mechanisms that had served so well in war could be replicated in the governance of an independent state. Meles on the other hand achieved considerable success, both in economic policy, where he looked to East Asia rather than Soviet Marxism or Western capitalism as a model, and also in foreign policy, where he adapted brilliantly to the post-Cold War world and sought to establish the consensual approach to the politics of the Horn that was symbolized by the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Where he failed badly, however, was in his model of political management, which remained dominated by his own regional power base in Tigray, with disastrous effects for Tigray itself, and was quite unable to cope with the consequences of a federal system that exacerbated, rather than resolving, Ethiopia's 'national question'.

Where Ethiopia might look to from here for a guide to its development I do not know, and my own capacity to predict Ethiopia's future has always been very limited. And having told a succession of British ambassadors to Ethiopia not to tell Ethiopians what to do, the least I can do is to abide by that advice myself. One of the most interesting developments in modern Ethiopia, however, has been the rapid growth of Pentecostalist Christianity, which has supplied Ethiopia's two most recent prime ministers, Haile-Mariam and Abiy, albeit from very different sections of the pentecostalist spectrum. Pentecostalism too, not least in the case of the present government, carries its own linkages between religion and legitimate political authority, in which power and money are regarded as ultimately derived from God. Whether such a system is capable of achieving the necessary combination that the EPRDF regime attempted but manifestly failed to achieve, of recognizing Ethiopia's diversity within a structure that sustains a peaceful and effective government, I am in no position to say.

Referenced works

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This report was produced by the Ethiopian Women Researchers Network (EWNET) within the Peace Research Facility (PRF). EWNET is dedicated to creating a vibrant and supportive network for Ethiopian women researchers in the social sciences and humanities. EWNET uses platforms such as podcasts and seminar series to disseminate and amplify the voices, work and research journeys of Ethiopian women researchers. Check the EWNET website for more information about the network and its activities: <https://ewnethub.com>

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