

ETHIOPIAN MODERNISM: A SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE

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## ETHIOPIAN MODERNISM: A SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE

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Recognizing that the beginning of the discourse of modern Ethiopian history is of urgent concern, this dissertation examines Ethiopian modernism's strategy, its limits, structures of exclusion and the totality of this experience. Focusing on prominent artists who are widely believed to be the pioneers of Ethiopian modernism, this research reveals the discursive and philosophical limitations and drawbacks of Ethiopian modernism, and its interpretation in the Ethiopian imaginary. Engaging with non-Western contexts of modernity, it interrogates modern Ethiopian art within the debates and parameters of African modernism, and thus establishes a space to analyze specific visual languages of Ethiopian modernist expressions. It evaluates how Ethiopian artists engaged principal questions of the meanings of Ethiopian culture within the matrix of modern art.

In relation to such imperatives and concerns, this dissertation raises the following questions: How did the meanings of Ethiopian literary texts and popular languages perform in articulating Ethiopian modernity and modernism, and how did this discourse relate to the hegemonic narratives of Western modernity and modernism? How did these texts and languages manifest themselves in diverse temporal and spatial situations of Ethiopian modernism? How did power relations condition the production, dissemination and reception of these texts and linguistic expressions? By positing such questions, this dissertation not only examines the intellectual and cultural contexts of the making of Ethiopian modernity, but more importantly, looks at Ethiopian modernism along with its local and global trajectories and contentions.

This research is also a first attempt in Ethiopian scholarship that historicizes the making of Ethiopian modernity and modernism from perspectives of discourses and cultural practices. It investigates the nature and parameters of Ethiopian modernity and modernism through the linguistic complexities of popular language and literature that play out in forms of collective expression and performance. Picking up on diverse, tenuous and culture specific notions of the production of discourse, such as the notion of the 'nation', it examines the texture of the beginning articulation of Ethiopian modernity and its subsequent trajectory. It explores Ethiopian modernity through a critical framework that intersects with local and global discourses of modernity. Consequently, it interrogates the implications of the canonical meaning of Ethiopian modernity and modernism as it covers the assumptions and heuristics that have shaped the grand tradition of Ethiopian political thought.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues for an alternative Ethiopian modernism that critically interrogates how the history and cultures of the non-Western 'Other' engage the larger context of modernism. It emphasizes that the meaning of Ethiopian modernism can only be consequential if it is examined through changing conditions of the ideologies of formal and conceptual representations that fortify such changes

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

For many Ethiopians who escaped the Marxist junta's slaughter of thousands of young people and settled in the West, the notion of citizenship and belonging to their country had permeated itself in an unstable and paradoxical identity. On the one hand, they could not escape recalling their nation's recent past of trauma and anguish and on the other they wanted to deny this contemporary tragedy to give order and structure to the place they have imagined at a distance. The terms and conditions of their identity required an imaginative way of dealing with loss. Conceptions were made and remade with unremitting rupture and continuation, and they constantly negotiated a way through varieties of memory, only to end up creating an even more increasingly fragmented and fractured identity.

While their idealistic dreams faded at a young age as purges, torture and witch hunts forced them to find refuge elsewhere, most of them struggled not to be reminded of the cause of their predicament and instead found refuge in a romanticized memory of the past that gave them temporary solace from their quandary. For many of them, this was the only way they could sustain citizenship and belonging to a nation that in reality they no longer knew. Many guarded these memories with silence. Elizabeth Giorgis was a product of this displaced generation of young Ethiopians who immigrated to the United States at a young age fearing persecution, genocide and torture.

Although her adopted homeland gave her sanctuary and protection, she lived as a dislocated soul for twenty-seven years remembering and at the same time denying the trauma and genocide of her past. Her birth place was hence imagined and frozen in time. This conflict prevented her from seeing the actual dynamics that had shaped her country during her long absence. 1995 was her first attempt to return to Ethiopia after twenty years of absence. She went to Ethiopia to be confronted by a nation's reality that

had gone through detrimental transformations. She went back three times after that and with each visit she managed to shatter the fantasies of a romanticized past that had burdened her for so long. Each visit removed the ambiguous experiences of diaspora and instilled in her that she could actually contribute to the well being of her country if she returned. September 11 also became a decisive factor. It was a day that forced her to deploy herself to explicit and instrumental purposes that could serve her country. She was one of those people who worked at the World Trade Center and was in the building on that day of mayhem. She was one of the fortunate ones who escaped but not without witnessing the loss of many colleagues and along with their loss, a *déjà's vu* reminder of the ultimate cruelty of mankind. She left Ethiopia during the time of the 'Red Terror' of the military junta. The 'Red Terror' of the Marxist junta lasted throughout the 1970s and human rights group say that 50,000 people were killed. Indeed, September 11 brought back many painful memories, but this time memory desired to be instrumental for change. She decided to embark on a profession that would enhance social change through creativity and cultural discourse.

She had finished both her undergraduate and graduate studies in the United States. She had worked as a banker for over seventeen years in the United States; as an Assistant Vice President for Bank of America in Northern California and as Assistant Vice President Loan trader for Mizuho Corporate Bank (Japan's largest bank and the world's largest bank) in New York. She abandoned banking after September 11 and acknowledging that cultural and political identity were intricately connected in the part of the world that she came from, decided to pursue a graduate degree in Museum Studies at New York University, hoping to manage a cultural institution in Ethiopia. She realized that the production of institutions that engaged in discourses of culture and history were crucial not only to positive progress against violence which still engulfs Ethiopia, but also to the political health and development process of her country. After

graduation, she was offered a job to head the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University, the premiere research center, museum and art gallery of the country.

She moved back to Ethiopia in 2004. Indeed, she could not reconcile the massive poverty and the breakdown of communities that had in the main formed the context of her country during her long absence. Her move nevertheless made her realize the ironies of the diasporic self that entangled itself with a romanticized notion of the past and that consistently failed to recognize a recent history of debt, mass migration and civil war. During her three years tenure at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, she had turned the institute from being a purely academic center to a vibrant venue of dialogue.

She again returned to school, this time to Cornell University to pursue her PhD in History of Art and to consequently fill a gap in the scholarship of Ethiopian art history. She returned to the institute after two years academic leave and currently serves as its director. She hopes to publish the outcome of this dissertation to serve as an ideal supplement to her dream of cultural discourse and dialogue, which she believes can significantly contribute to the challenges facing peace, cooperation and stability.

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## **Introduction**

Any meaningful discussion of modernity, modernism and modernization in Ethiopia has yet to take place among Ethiopian intellectuals. Scholars have attempted to talk about the projects of Ethiopian modernity in a narrow range of meaning that neglects to construct the processes of modernity within the discursive space of its multiplicity and cultural specificity. Not only does the discourse lack the focus of the meta-narrative of modernity, that of the methodological, archival and theoretical requirements particular to modernist studies, but the theoretical charters of many Ethiopian intellectuals also fall short of looking at the totality of political, social, and cultural phenomena of Ethiopian modernity, within the paradox shared by all non-Western modernities. Conventional preconceptions by Ethiopian historians of modernity and modernism are often confused with processes of modernization, complicit in projects of nation and Empire.

As it is globally theorized, modernity has been characterized by a continuous process of ruptures and fragmentations. However, the evolving, contested and multidisciplinary field of modernist studies has lost sight of such ruptures and fragmentations in Ethiopian scholarly discourse, and is instead filled with a linear narrative of history. Although Ethiopia has never been colonized, the discourse of modernity in Ethiopia can only be understood within the critical discursive space of modernity that explores the relations between nations and cultures, the relations between colonialism, nationalism and imperialism, and the theories that have attempted to rework these frameworks in the heterogeneous space of modernity.

How then can one understand the specific complexities of Ethiopian modernity and modernism? While any interpretation will allow for what has been most lacking in Ethiopia's history of modernity and modernism, the schema that I am attempting to set

out will articulate a coherent, theoretically and historically formulated structure within the cultural texture of Ethiopian society. It ought to be made clear, perhaps, that modernism as an artistic movement held little sway in the cultural fabric of the nation. The extent of its bearing can best be understood from the literary materials produced that I will attempt to analyze in the first and third chapter of this work. It should be clear, however, that when I use the term ‘modernity,’ I mean to distinguish between the historical, cultural, and political conditions of the time, and I use ‘modernism’ to signify the literary and aesthetic representations of those historical conditions. Modernity defined in this way becomes the historical and cultural condition that makes modernism both necessary and possible.

My intervention in this entire dissertation is based on an analysis of the local and the vernacular, and thus my interrogation, without which this dissertation would have been substantially different, emerges. “It is clear, I hope,” said Edward Said (1979, p.20), “that my concern with authority does not entail analysis of what lies hidden in the Orientalist text, but analysis rather of the text’s surface, its exteriority to what it describes.” Of course, Said was critiquing the exteriority of the representation of the Orient, but he was ultimately calling for a new kind of intellectual enterprise to consider the ‘Other.’ Often, the theories of the ‘Other’ that emerge from Western academic institutions are conceptually insightful, but they nevertheless emerge from specific historical contexts. Even theories of post colonialism and cultural studies that enabled the creation of new ground rules in the interpretations of non-Western cultures often look at Africa from a distant Western institutional base.

Certainly, these interventions have given us a critical paradigm with which we can interrogate the hierarchies found in culture like race, gender and ethnicity. Yet, the riches of interiority gives the origin of a text a substantial and important trajectory where the vernacular author follows his/her source quite closely with a careful and

accurate transcription. Often, the reinterpretation and the interrogation of the local and vernacular lose key components in translation without taking note of the specific grammar and semantics of that context. This specificity is usually attained not only through an intimate engagement with the archives, but also through rich conversations with the local intellectual milieu about the particular context and content.

### ***Contextualizing Ethiopian Modernity and Modernism***

In an article entitled *Modernity and Revolution*, Perry Anderson critiques notions of modernity and modernism that are conceptualized in Marshall Berman's *All that is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity*. Anderson's essential argument problematizes the concept of modernity and modernism espoused by Berman. Anderson was primarily discussing European modernisms of the *fin de siecle*, and to that process, he triangulates the historical advent of European modernism into three coordinates of what he calls:

The codification of a highly formalized academicism in the visual and other arts-in-the political and cultural tone of pre-first World War Europe, the emergence within these societies of technologies and inventions of the second Industrial Revolution and the imaginative proximity of social revolution in the possible revolutionary outcome of the downfall of the old order. (Anderson, 1984, p.104)

Accordingly, he describes these three factors, respectfully, as a usable classical past through official academicism, an indeterminate technical present with various future possibilities, and an unpredictable future with a prospect of revolution. Anderson was suggesting that the homogenized concept of European modernism had lost much of its coherence, even in Europe itself with increasing historical claims on it. For him, the historical period of modernism constitutes the collision of past and present, and he particularly critiqued the experience of modernity and its translation into various

visions of modernism. For Anderson, the antinomies of European modernism hence had to be repositioned beyond the partial view of earlier classical theories of modernism. He states: “Modernism too needs to be framed within some more differential conceptions of historical time. A second, and related point is that once it is treated in this way, it is striking how uneven its distribution actually is, geographically. Even within the European or Western world generally, there are major areas that scarcely generated any modernism momentum at all.” (Anderson, 1984, p.105)

Anderson’s central argument is a contestation to any form of a linear artistic progression, and that specific conjunctures in modernism’s history have made its trajectory uneven with several different multinational conceptions. I invoke Anderson’s argument of European modernism’s uncertainty to help me map out the temporalities of Ethiopian modernism. What makes his discussion interesting to my argument is Ethiopia’s unique unexamined history of modernity and modernism and the need to construct a conception of coordinates that would look into pertinent contexts of cultural and political value. Moreover, what makes his argument also important is the criticality of defining modernism in specific contexts since its materialization varies with time and place.

How does this irregularly self-conscious, and unevenly experienced phenomena of modernism manifest itself in the non-West? Such an explanation would involve the intersection of different historical temporalities of European modernity itself. “Primitivism,” said Lowery Stokes Sims (2002, p.6), “maintained and supported the power relationships of colonialism; that of the center versus the periphery, intellectual versus emotional and objective versus subjective...If modern art could not exist without the primitive, can the primitive then become modern?” Even as intellectual constructs and spatial practices have sought to enforce the dichotomies between the

modern and the 'Other,' the convoluted nature of modernity comes into focus only through the dynamic interplay of cultures across the history of the 'modern.'

The development of modernity as a theory is marked by crises, particularly in its colonial interface, which has periodically threatened its Occidental ontology. No crisis has been as profound for modernity as the crisis brought about by the collapse of colonialism. Colonialism was a totalizing event that desired closure. It saw the world as always already defined in terms of the relationship of the colonized to the colonizer, the margin to the center, etc. Hence, for those in the margin, modernity was an opening of a field of inquiry and understanding following a period of relative closure, i.e. the closure of colonialism. In a lecture tour in Africa, Partha Chatterjee (1997) said:

All that needs to be noticed is that whereas Kant, speaking at the founding moment of Western modernity, looks at the present as the site of one's escape from the past, for us it is precisely the present from which we feel we must escape. This makes the very modality of our coping with modernity radically different from the historically evolved modes of Western modernity. Ours is the modernity of the once colonized. The same historical process that has taught us the value of modernity has also made us the victims of modernity.

How did the experience of colonization affect those who were colonized while also influencing the colonizers? How did colonial education and language influence the culture and identity of the colonized? What are the emergent forms of postcolonial identity since the departure of the colonizers? These are questions that cannot be neatly cushioned or mediated either in terms of resistance and assimilation by both colonizer/colonized cultural traditions. In its quest for a global reach, European colonialism indeed created a new politics of knowledge and of culture in the non-Western world. European modernity and its colonial quest created unresolved disputes and incomplete projects in its colonized territory. Hierarchical, unequal and oppressive, this new politics of knowledge and culture imposed itself on the cultures of the colonized often

by means of violence, producing and naturalizing differences by creating and separating the modern from the non-modern, and the colonizer from the colonized. These differences, however, were not natural, and hence were not stable; they were relational rather than oppositional. The West was partly internalized by the colonized during the colonial period, and amalgamating the modern West into the vernacular was not a cognitive choice, but part and parcel of the non-West's historical narrative. The very idea of a homogenized concept of European modernity has therefore been constantly re-examined in its unavoidable dialogue with the 'Other,' and today an altogether new configuration of multiple modernities prevails in the previously colonized non-West, formed in the space and time of the colonial interphase.

Theories of alternative modernities have proliferated in the last two decades with scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty, Dilip Gaonkar, Nestor Garcia Cancini, Arjun Appadurai, Timothy Mitchell, Stuart Hall and Naoki Sakai among others.<sup>1</sup> Their work generally asserts that modernity is here to stay with an uneven experience, and that different starting points of the transition to modernity have led to different outcomes. Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential *Provincializing Europe* particularly addresses Europe, which is often taken to be the original site of modernity in many histories of non-Western countries. Chakrabarty has argued that this imaginary Europe is built into the social sciences and political thought of non-Western countries and that their histories carry with it European assumptions of disenchanted space. For Chakrabarty, this type of historicizing of non-Western people bears problematic categories of capitalist transition in the 'third world' that is often looked at as either incomplete or lacking. In a discussion on the 'imaginary waiting-room of history,' Chakrabarty has questioned how

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<sup>1</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential book *Provincializing Europe*, Dilip Gaonkar's *Alternative Modernities*, Nestor Garcia Cancini's *Hybrid Cultures*, Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large*, Timothy Mitchell's *Questions of Modernity* and Naoki Sakai's *Translation and Subjectivity* are some of the most important works produced in the area of modernity and its multiple manifestations.

modernity could happen again in the non-West if it already had its authentic incarnation in Europe. He has asserted that the non-West—the waiting-room—is doomed either never to be quite modern or to possess only a semblance of modernity.

This is a view of history and modernity has, according to Chakrabarty, at once liberated, defined, and shackled the non-West in its discriminatory universalism. Chakrabarty has given us a lexicon to deal with modernity and the colonial encounter, to clarify the way in which we think about the social sciences of the non-West, and to think alternatively to the circumscribed universality of European modernity. To provincialize Europe is not to conquer Europe, but is a means to interrogate some of the fundamental notions by which the non-West locates and defines itself within the idea of Europe as the source and paradigm of progress and history. Can the notion of Europe be extricated from the core of the practice of history in a non-European place? A genealogy subversive to European modernity and a critical engagement that explores the correspondence of European modernity to the non-West has also been articulated by scholars like Dilip Gaonkar. Gaonkar (2001, p.1) has stated:

To think in terms of ‘alternative modernities’ is to admit that modernity is inescapable and to desist from speculation about the end of modernity. Born in and of the West some centuries ago under relatively specific sociohistorical conditions, modernity is now everywhere. It has arrived not suddenly but slowly, bit by bit over the long duree... awakened by contact, transported through commerce, administered by empires, bearing colonial inscriptions; propelled by nationalism; and now increasingly steered by global media, migration and capital. And it continues to “arrive and emerge,” as always in opportunistic fragments accompanied by utopic rhetoric, but no longer from the West alone, although the West remains the major clearing house of global modernity.

Modernism, too, is a construct of this historically complex trajectory where its dialogue has set various discursive boundaries that have recognized difference and

malleability through the usage of resource in history. It is important to note that the colonial discourse of modernism in countries like Ethiopia is a discursive and philosophical construct that cannot be discussed only in terms of artistic achievements, but also in terms of its political, social and general cultural substructures. The discursive boundary of non-Western modernism has since deployed itself as a distinct category of modernism that rejects a totalizing effect of modernity, by taking on the task of clarifying the complex and contradictory relationship of modernity.

It is within this colonial discourse and perspective that I will look into Ethiopian modernity and modernism and their trajectories and contentions. While earlier intellectuals were enamored by the concept of ‘civilization,’ often interchanged with ‘Westernization,’ but simply meaning the integration of Western innovations that would help Ethiopia come out from its backward stature, later intellectuals like Bahru Zewde freely traded off concepts of modernization with modernity and modernism. In *Pioneers of Change: the Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century*, Bahru Zewde (2005) failed to take into account the social experiences of modernity’s ambivalence and exceptions in different geographical settings. In what is considered one of the most important works of modern Ethiopian intellectuals, Bahru Zewde talked about Ethiopian modernization without tackling the concept of modernity as a philosophical construct of Occidental rationalism; that of the aesthetics, social, philosophical and sociological symptoms of Western culture and society as the point of departure for further development of one’s society or modernization.

Little work has been done in the area of Ethiopian intellectual history. *Pioneers of Change: the Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century* presents the accomplishments of Ethiopian intellectuals, short of their history of thought and the trajectory of this thought from epoch to epoch. Moreover, as I have stated above, the understanding of modernity and modernism in this text is devoid of the philosophical

angst and formal experimentalism of modernism and modernity as well as the specific contexts that would have defined Ethiopian modernity and modernism. Nevertheless, this work is important for being the pioneer in its genre.

While this type of controversial and at times conflictive narrative composes contemporary discourse of Ethiopian modernism and modernity, the complexities get even more compounded when many contemporary intellectuals refuse to explore the plurality of modernity's global contexts, particularly for marginalized subjects under the premise that Ethiopia had never been colonized. Indeed, what makes Ethiopia unique in the colonial discourse of modernity and modernism is the fact that the country had never been colonized. While this may be the fact, temporal considerations should give way to spatial ones where the emphasis of colonizer/colonized relations should instead articulate the significance of power relations and the relationship of Ethiopia to the West as one that is often margin to center, and far from free of colonial influence or domination. Any analysis of the general conceptions of Ethiopia's modernism and modernity is by extension a question of positionality in the discourses legitimizing Eurocentrism which continue to marginalize the cultural production of former colonies.

Critical thinking about Ethiopian modernity and modernism should hence incorporate colonialism and its legacies, i.e. the impact it had on notions of political community and how this community charted the future of Ethiopian society in political thought, collective identity, historical memory, pedagogy and in literature and the arts. The failure to include these parameters in the discussion of social, political and cultural analysis of Ethiopian modernity, within the assumption of not being colonized and therefore not being part of the colonial experience, dismisses essential paradigms that are relevant to an analysis of history.

It could however, be argued that various translations of modernism have arisen within specific contexts that were unique to Ethiopia as opposed to formerly colonized countries. For instance, valorizing tradition was a key component in the wake of the anti-colonial movements of the formerly colonized. In Ethiopia, modernity and modernism was perceived as a moment of break between past and present which dichotomized tradition and modernity. This is clearly seen in the way in which literary modernists attempted to articulate the production of knowledge as one that assumed European culture and custom as universal, normative and superior. I will, in detail, analyze this actuality in Chapter Three of literary modernism.

Taking Raymond Williams' (1989, p.3) popular query, "When was modernism?", an interrogation of which he said is "a historical questioning of what is, in very different ways a problem, but also a dominant and misleading ideology," I ask similarly: When and what was modernism in Ethiopia? As argued above, the historical questioning of modernism in countries like Ethiopia requires the investigation of a series of metamorphoses, and the question of how these transformations are best conceived requires a periodization of its modernist history from an epistemological and political perspective. Evoking Perry Anderson's coordinates in the context of Ethiopia, one might ask: What were the temporalities that suggest a conjunctural explanation of aesthetic practices that were grouped as modernist?

Coming back to Anderson's triangulated field of forces, how then can one historicize Ethiopian modernism taking his argument as a point of reference? My hypothesis here is that we should look for a set of important historical coordinates that I argue implicated movements of modernist significations, its contextual origins and reception, and the recovery of its historical meanings. I argue that the vestiges of these coordinates were 1) the shock of the 1935 Italian invasion that fundamentally upset the political order and Emperor Haile Selassie's flight to exile, 2) the end of global

colonialism that was partly motivated by the end of Empire as well as the adoption of official nationalism, and 3) the eruption of a socialist revolution in 1974. I believe that different generations of intellectuals within these triangulated coordinates have been rethinking the terms modernity and modernism.

Ethiopia was invaded by Fascist Italy in 1935, and the Italians occupied the country until 1941. It was in the Battle of Adwa that the Italians were first defeated in 1896. The Battle of Adwa was symbolic to Africans living under colonial rule since Ethiopia was the first country in Africa to defeat a European colonial power, demystifying the myth that white armies in Africa were invincible. The Italian invasion of 1935, however, complicated notions of history and nation. For the intellectual, a profound sense of political difference to what had been before destabilized her/his fixed identity category that believed in Empire and nation. The Empire that defeated the Italians at Adwa was incapable of defending its territory. The Emperor Haile Selassie himself left for exile in a move that was resented by many Ethiopians who were accustomed to a warrior emperor. This specific historical juncture forced the intellectual to think, engage and question the Empire that had long been the dominant political form where identity and imperial ideology had been complementary. This is further elaborated in my discussion of early intellectuals in Chapter Three on literary modernism. The project of modernity also became an official discourse and was given much attention after the Emperor's return from exile in what some scholars say was image building from the repercussion of the War.

The second coordinate can be attributed to the end of global colonialism and the adoption of what Benedict Anderson has called 'official nationalism.' In the case of the fall of global colonialism, Ethiopia became the hub for the discourse of an African modernity in the making. The 1950s and 1960s, the period after the Italo-Ethiopian War and the heyday of the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, was a time when the

movement of African decolonization, charged with a radical popular consciousness, set the ground for a great many innovations in theater, literature and art throughout the continent. Ethiopia during the 1950s and 60s was politically significant for African activism and had attained great notoriety as a distinct hallmark of Pan-Africanism.

The quest for continental unity and integration took root in Addis Ababa in 1963 when heads of African states convened to a historic meeting at the Organization of African Unity. Ethiopian modernism emerged within this paradigm of a deeply politicized search for an African identity. On the other hand, nationalism and modernity were adopted as a policy in the multi-ethnic Empire of Ethiopia that legitimized the claim of the Solomonic dynasty of Emperor Haile Selassie to national authority and identity. ‘Official nationalism,’ where rhetoric of modernity without a clear codification was intimately related to national history, routinely served as a response to threats from popular nationalism. The end of global colonialism and the adoption of ‘official nationalism’ resulted in two sets of intellectuals who played key roles in the making of Ethiopian modernity and modernism, and who in different ways thought about imperial ideology.

At the state level, cosmopolitan intellectual elites such as Aklilu Habte Wold, Foreign Minister (1947-1958) and Prime Minister (1961-1974) followed a reformist policy that was short of transforming Empire into republic, but that nevertheless made a first attempt to try to overhaul absolute imperial ideology. Perry Anderson’s third coordinate of an ‘imaginative proximity of social revolution’ reflected itself in a new ideal of state and nation, where at the non-state level, a budding intellectual of students who thought Marxism was a way to modernity challenged the Emperor’s self assumed heroism against Italian fascism and patronage of African anti-colonial resistance. This movement and its Marxist ideology played a key role in the mass uprising of 1974.

The third coordinate is thus the revolution of 1974 itself and the subsequent seventeen years of a socialist military rule where modernity and modernism took on a different perspective. No crisis had been so profound to the trajectories of modernism than the introduction of Marxism to Ethiopian history. Seventeen years of Marxist rule witnessed a revolution imbued with narrow empiricism and a penchant for broad theoretical generalizations. The historical dialectic moved through the class struggle; the class that represented the negation of the past was the privileged agent of history. The ‘revolutionary’ theorist became the historian, and historicism reinstated a conception of history as a single narrative within a totalizing framework and a distinct emphasis on Marxism as the legitimate hermeneutics. As a result of such an absolutist stand and totalizing state sanctioned ideology, thousands of Ethiopian men and women activists were slaughtered and many more were exiled during what came to be known as the “Red Terror.” Modernism and modernity, as associated with state sanctioned ideology, thus reflected the Ethiopian subject’s interiority and the enduring impact of an imported ideology.

Although the above mentioned coordinates are important historical junctures of Ethiopian modernity and modernism, I will nevertheless trace the beginning of Ethiopian modernity in Chapter One to as early as the Battle of Adwa when I discuss the notion of the nation in the *ketet* (proclamations of war) of Menelik II and Haile Selassie, to the 1914 work of Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn<sup>2</sup> titled *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia* (Emperor Menelik and Ethiopia), and to 1925 when I discuss the writers of *Berhanena Selam*<sup>3</sup> at the turn of the century. I believe that the quest for the meaning of

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<sup>2</sup> Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn is an early intellectual, very well-known for his book written in 1914 called *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia* (Emperor Menelik and Ethiopia), which I discuss in Chapter One in detail. His second book is called *Yemengestna Yehzb Astedader* (Government and People) which mainly focused on the labor theory of value.

<sup>3</sup> Berhanena Selam was the first newspaper that was published by some of the prominent intellectuals of Ethiopian modern history. A weekly newspaper, it was first published in 1924. The paper is well known for its deliberation on different issues of modernity. The paper is discussed thoroughly in Chapter One.

modernity began with the expression of modernity by literary intellectuals like Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn and the writers of *Berhanena Selam* at the turn of the century. Such early intellectuals' obsession with the "new" and "modern" laid a profound paradigm for the subsequent interrogation of Ethiopian modernity and modernism and their meaning. Along with the *ketet*, I will also attempt to investigate the structure of modernity through the nation as imagined in the works of Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn and the writers of *Berhanena Selam*. I believe that such an idea of the nation with its imagery and vocabulary has given the discourse of modernity its reality and presence within its own articulation of the configuration of power. The relationship between the state and its citizen was a relationship of power, often of a complex hegemony in which the construction of the nation played an important role. I believe that initial articulations of modernity through the imagination of the nation will set important preambles to later trajectories of modernity and modernism.

I particularly look into the work of Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn's *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia* to explore not only the comprehension of the nation, but also to examine early discourses of modernity from an intellectual that I consider to have been the first to critically examine ideas of modernity. Some scholars attribute the works of Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn and of *Berhanena Selam* writers to a movement of modernization. I argue that modernization, in the Ethiopian context, has been the process of bringing the institutions and infrastructures that have been mainly developed in the West through the process of modernity with an attempt to accommodate modernity within a sense of Ethiopian identity, culture and historical experience.

Although many scholars claim Emperor Tewodros (1855-1869) initiated various modernizing projects in his effort to establish an independent and sovereign Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Selassie's reign (1930-1974) embodies the modern project where serious social changes took place and where the epistemological insight that bears on

the notion of the ‘modern’ gained a distinct importance. In Chapter One, I also focus on education, Haile Selassie’s initial project of modernity that vociferously began after his return from exile, and an issue of central importance in that it reveals the organizing principle that informed the early terrain of Ethiopian modernity. Notwithstanding the fact that modernity found its primary direct expression through Emperor Haile Selassie’s vision of modern education, its political evolution will also be singled out as evidence of the Emperor’s changed political conjuncture after returning back from exile. I will in this chapter also discuss the founding of the Fine Art School in 1957, which particularly shaped the beginning of Ethiopian modernism, although art education itself assumed a shallow perception of modernism that only served to legitimate the Emperor’s modernizing strategy.

The different coordinates I have attempted to set as anchorage or political relays of Ethiopian modernity and modernism will be positioned in various chapters of this work. The first coordinate, which I said was the shock of the Italian invasion and the Emperor’s flight to exile, will be discussed in Chapter One when I explore Haile Selassie’s realm of Western education, as well as in the discussion of the literary modernists in Chapter Three. In Chapter Two, I look into the impact of Skunder Boghossian, Ethiopia’s avant-garde modernist who lived in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s during the anti-colonial and independence movements. He is an artist who I believe set the foundational narrative of Ethiopian modernism. Boghossian challenged the neat demarcation between tradition and modernity and presented new viewpoints and fresh imagery about Africa and the African experience. By incorporating visual motifs and objects from classical west and central African art in his paintings, Boghossian presented a Pan-African perspective in Africa’s contribution to modern and contemporary art, with the full meaning of selfhood and with an attempt to follow the complex narratives of the independence movements of the appropriation, rejection, and

permutation of diverse experiences and cultural contexts. Skunder Boghossian taught in the Fine Art School for three years and left an indelible mark on Ethiopian modernism. In this regards, I argue that Boghossian was the first artist who opened up a new horizon and definition of colonial subjectivity by challenging essentialized concepts of Ethiopian identity within a strategic and positional structure of representation.

In Chapter Three, and in relation to literary modernism, I investigate the interactions between visual and written texts in an attempt to place Ethiopian visual modernism in the institutional and ideological context within which it was produced. I believe that the works of Skunder Boghossian, as well as the works of the literary modernists, predicated itself from the second coordinate, which I have stated to be the fall of global colonialism. In this context, I argue that the discourse that shaped the ambivalent construction of Ethiopian literary modernism also found its ultimate expression in visual art beginning in 1957, the year the Fine Art School opened. Arguing in such a way, opens up a larger perspective in which to situate and understand Ethiopian visual modernism, particularly where literature on Ethiopian modern art history and the measure of its complexity is non-existent.

The third coordinate I mapped out to mark Ethiopian modernity and modernism was the socialist revolution of 1974, which is thoroughly discussed in Chapter Four. As stated above, I will be looking at the socialist regime of the military junta (1974-1991) in Chapter Four and will argue that the majority of artistic production from this period had a creative edge that hinged on the vernacular, that triggered broad acceptance from mass culture, and that validated shared sensibilities. I invoke the works of Achille Mbembe and Walter Benjamin for their perceptions of an alienated society and society's dialectical history of subjectivity. I also attempt to explore how the subjects of rule interpret and creatively engage with the power of the State. Chapter Four also questions the identity and function of art in a world saturated not only with popular

imagery, but also with the seductive power of artifacts of mass culture. Benjamin's *Arcades Project* particularly portrays the paradoxical metaphors of the experience of the subject within this dynamic. The idea that the subject is in clear dialogue with mass culture complicates the notion of the 'sublime,' thus foregrounding a critical interrogation of canonical ideologies of art and bringing to discourse the possibilities of art grounded in mass culture. The normative Western taxonomy of this type of art aligns itself to 'kitsch,' which is an adversary to high art. Whether an object is 'kitsch' implicates consideration of purpose and context. From this perspective, this chapter will investigate the production of art at this juncture in Ethiopian history

Chapter Five explores contemporary works of art and movement. Since it is almost impossible to cover the entire setting of contemporary art that has proliferated in the last decade, I chose to focus on artists who have come to work collaboratively after the fall of the military junta, and who I believe have set the foreground of the most recent contemporary art practices in Ethiopia. I then focus on the works of three contemporary artists—Behailu Bezabih, Bekele Mekonnen, Bisrat Shebabaw, Salem Mekuria and Michael Tsegaye who I believe have set new trends in Ethiopian modernism taking into account the aesthetic, political, and philosophical questions of Ethiopian modernity and modernism. Finally, I want to note that my analysis of the earlier articulations of Ethiopian modernity and modernism takes its main interrogations from popular fiction and notes of intellectuals such as of Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn whose work was the first investigation of its kind that brought to light intricate cultural notions and historical imaginations such as the concept of the nation into discourse on the making of Ethiopian modernity.

I want to emphasize that this research as a discourse on basic themes of the Ethiopian imaginary is more a starting point than a store of conclusions. The need to begin this discourse that is completely lacking in our academic and cultural institutions

is paramount if we are to place modern Ethiopian history in proper perspective. As I have attempted to do in Chapters One and Three, using popular fiction and literary notes in Chapters Four and Five would also have given this research a sharp edge and more localized and vernacularized critical body of thought. Nevertheless, the sheer magnitude of literature that has developed in the last two decades needs a painstaking reflection and a new phase of research that the scope of this dissertation cannot accommodate.

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## Chapter 1

### **Earlier Articulations of Modernity: Emperor Haile Selassie's Education Policy and The Fine Art School**

As stated in the introductory chapter, the discourse of Ethiopian modernity has often been informed by the socio economic phenomena of modernization in the context of development and where modernity, modernization and westernization were considered identical. For instance, in *Pioneers of Change Reformist Intellectuals of the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, Bahru Zewde (2005, p.1) stated:

There are probably few concepts as ambiguous and elusive as that of modernization...indeed, all countries have their modern period of history, that of Western Europe at one end of the spectrum posing back to the sixteenth century while in some countries of Africa and Asia the onset of the period is deferred until the twentieth. A fundamental problem of the concept has been its ethnocentric bias that is its close association with the Western experience. A result of this association has been that modernization has all too often been synonymous with westernization. Thus, some of the experiences of the west, such as industrialization and the growth of democratic institutions have come to serve, consciously or unconsciously, as the yardsticks for the modernization of a society. Such an identification of the concept with the western experience is not difficult to understand, given the fact that it has been western social scientists, and particularly American social scientists who have popularized it. This is not to say however that attempts have not been made to come up with more universal definitions of the concept.

In the section called *Modernization and the Role of Intellectuals*, Zewde deliberates on similar concepts of modernization, such as the above, in different parts of the world and particularly in Japan. He then jumps in a somewhat bewildering way to an historical account of Ethiopia's interaction with the Western world, coming up with lists of early intellectuals who were acclimated to Western education. Without

articulating the broad historical movement of modernity that is imperative and crucial for any analysis of modernization theory, Bahru Zewde sets up the introductory chapter of his book not only by freely interchanging notions of modernization with modernity, but also by failing to come up with a coherent framework that situates Ethiopia and Ethiopian intellectuals in the scaffold of his own reflection of concepts of modernization. Instead, he generates a narrative of modernization which expresses the vision most successfully implanted in the mass consciousness of post-war Japan.

Zewde's analysis of modernity centers on Ethiopian derisory socio-economic progress, technological advancement, and paltry industrial upheavals. Moreover, this book, which is a primary document detailing the contribution of modern Ethiopian intellectuals, falls short of accounting the disciplinary identity and purpose of modernity as an inquiry of thought. Modernity and modernism have therefore often been used in Ethiopian scholarship to signify Europeanization and Westernization. The 'modern' or modernity is nevertheless a spatio-temporally-based concept that is not constituted by fixed socio-historical traits. It is on the contrary shaped in a contested space of decisions and actions in which ideas are unremittingly critiqued and revised.

The question, then, is how to frame the discourse of Ethiopian modernity and modernism in an intellectual history that has neglected the evaluation of these important issues in the making of modernity. Although Ethiopia has never been colonized, I argue that the interrogation of Ethiopian modernity among the modernists that Bahru Zewde has documented in his book has mainly manifested itself in the dichotomy of 'Other' and 'Otherness.' The question of 'Otherness' as a central moral and political issue is one that cannot be ignored, and its predicament extends itself to self-questioning that was usually attended by a sense of acknowledgement of alterity. This alterity was at once highly local in its engagement with the urgent political and social problems of Ethiopia and widely pertinent in its confrontation of the ethical

demands of ‘Otherness.’ Whether Ethiopia was colonized or not, the belief of ‘Otherness’ prevailed because just like any other non-Western society, Ethiopia was posited by the West in a Eurocentric archetype that had historically excluded discourse of alterity, and that perceived subordinated groups from the point of view of a dominant ‘first world’ culture. I elaborate on this by looking to the work of the *Berhanena Selam* newspaper writers and to Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn’s work *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia* in order to investigate the relation of ‘Otherness’ to culture and knowledge in the beginning articulation of Ethiopian modernity.

The role of literature in the making of Ethiopian modernism and its intersecting dialogue with the visual arts is discussed more elaborately in Chapter Three. The role of *Berhanena Selam* is surveyed as a historically viable document that simultaneously asserted and subverted authority in the instigation of Ethiopian modernity and modernism and that offered a highly vibrant contribution to the debates surrounding modernity. Although both the writers of *Berhanena Selam* and Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn fit the discursive parameters of Ethiopian literary modernism, in this chapter, I look at the works of these writers and intellectuals to examine the ways they confronted modernity and the complex ways in which the interplay between modernity, the deliberation of ‘Otherness’ and the construction of the nation was played. Looking at the discursive parameters of the concept of the nation is particularly critical to map the intellectual and ideological framework of the foundational narrative of Ethiopian modernity. I believe that all narratives of modernity revolved around the notion of the nation. Furthermore, I especially believe that Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn’s work *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia*, although mentioned by many intellectuals, including Bahru Zewde, as an important document of its time, has not been decoded effectively in its instrumentality and direct referentiality to the discussion of Ethiopian modernity. I especially consider this work to have opened a space for the apprehension of

‘Otherness’ despite the exceptionalist performative text of the larger narrative of Ethiopian history that fails to incorporate colonialism and its legacies under the assumption of not being colonized.

***Earlier Articulations of Modernity: Proclamations of War (Ketet), Berhanena Selam and Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn***

How did the early modernists fashion their distinctive response to the larger paradigm of European modernity? Despite their history of not being colonized, how did they apprehend an alterity that excluded them from its discourse but had simultaneously imposed itself upon the prevailing discourse? How did the discourse of modernity that estranged as it enticed, and that foregrounded the symbolic as it exploited the imaginary, pronounce itself in the writings of these intellectuals? How did the scanty changes in technology impact the form and reception of early intellectual thought? More importantly, as I have mentioned above, how was the nation imagined and articulated by these intellectuals who, I believe, informed the discourse of modernity that translated the State and its citizens in the configuration of Ethiopian modernity? Such are questions which are most lacking in Ethiopian academic discourse and which I therefore attempt to interrogate in the course of this project. These are also questions that are relevant to any analysis of Ethiopian modernism and modernity.

The relation between the State and the citizen as well as the State’s many interventions in the life of the citizen, is especially important in the construction of the imagination of the nation. The State and an independent intelligentsia have also confronted each other in an open ended contest where overall control by both parties was not possible or desirable. One especially sees this contestation in Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn’s *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia*. The discursive performance of nationhood by the State through the conspicuous representations of an all encompassing affinity to national value and myth, constructed and imagined through shared experiential spaces,

is an unexamined premise that I attempt to explore in this chapter. The collective being realized and legitimated through institutional and discursive practices is an essential reading for anyone wishing to assess the project of Ethiopian modernity and modernism.

In *Nation and Imagination*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000, p.149) broached several questions on Bengali modernity by rethinking the use of Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagination.' Turning to one of Rabridranath Tagore's writings, Chakrabarty has argued that understanding modernity in non-European contexts requires diverse ways that is attentive to heterogeneous social experiences. The center of Chakrabarty's critical account is the imaginary bonding between nation and citizen that is often mediated through complex themes of historical consciousness associated with a variety of socially, politically and culturally mottled processes of change. To this process, Chakrabarty has argued that Anderson's category of 'imagination' in the analysis of nationalism "opens up the word for further interrogation to make visible the heterogeneous practices of seeing we often bring under the jurisdiction of this one European word, 'imagination.'" (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.149) Chakrabarty employs the idea of imagination as an "argument regarding a non totalizing conception of the political...to allow for the possibility that the field of the political is constitutively not singular." (ibid) In a concept that is beyond the reach of academic historians, Chakrabarty has used Tagore's 'piercing the veil of the real' exemplar, which Tagore used to characterize Sister Nivedita's, a Catholic missionary in India.

Chakrabarty has voiced his reproach of historicist and objectivist ethos that reduces discourse to the discovery of universal truths. He has asked:

If the nation, the people, or the country were not just to be observed, described, and critiqued but loved as well, what would guarantee that they were indeed worth loving unless one also saw in them that were already lovable? What if the real, the natural, and the historically

accurate did not generate the feeling of devotion or adoration? An objectivist, realist view might lead only to disidentification. Nationalism, one may then say, presents the question of vision and imagination in ways more complicated than a straightforward identification of the realist or the factual with the political might suggest. (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.149)

What Chakrabarty contests is that objectivist and historicist truths cannot describe the contingent and the philosophical that answers the abstract questions regarding objectivity. Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as an "imagined political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 1991, p.15) is widely studied and discussed in the intellectual community of our time. The lack of representation of particularities of many 'nations' in Anderson's work nevertheless raises critical points, such as Chakrabarty's interrogation of the category 'imagination' to reconsider Anderson's finished historical certainty to a wide array of context of specific national histories. In his book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Partha Chatterjee has also challenged Anderson's formulation of the nation as one that is "highly unorthodox" and that "refuses to 'define' nation by a set of external and abstract criteria." (Chatterjee, 2000, p.19) It is this external and abstract criterion that Chakrabarty also interrogates through Tagore's 'piercing the veil of the real' imagination of the Indian nation. The complex ways in which the individual experiences a sense of attachment to imagined communities is therefore tantamount to the construction of social identities.

Going back to Tagore, Tagore (as cited in Chakrabarty, 2000, p.150) described Sister Nivedita's mission in India in the following way:

We hear about Europeans who came to India with feelings of devotion toward her, having been attracted by our scriptures or by the character or the words of some of our holy men...but they returned empty handed, their sense of devotion waning over time and discarded in the end. They could not pierce the veil of poverty and incompleteness in the country as

a whole to see what they had read about in the scriptures or what they had seen in the characters of holy men.

Chakrabarty's understanding of this statement frames cultural values and assumptions within a myth that performs as an objective truth. As he stated:

How could one reconcile the need for these two different and contradictory ways of seeing the nation? The critical eye that sought out the defects in the nation for the purpose of reform and improvement, and the adoring eye that saw the nation as already beautiful or sublime? (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.151)

To be able to love India was therefore to go beyond realism, or to 'pierce the veil of the real' as Tagore rightly asserted. Chakrabarty (2000, p.151) then, has asserted: "What did it mean to pierce the veil of the real or to see beyond it? Blending as we will see, idioms of European romanticism with those of Hindu metaphysics, Tagore sometimes explained such sight as a matter of seeing the eternal that lay beyond the veil of the everyday." Chakrabarty has brought into discourse the imaginary bonding between nation and citizen, not as an esoteric issue, but as one that "transcends the objective and historical vision, and as one that is rooted in a multifarious range of contextual factors that identifies and legitimates symbolical notions of truth unrelated to materialist or objectivist methods." (ibid)

Chakrabarty hence has questioned Benedict Anderson's hypotheses of the imagination within the conception of nationalism. "Imagination, I submit," he said, "remains a mentalist, subject centered category in Anderson's thought provoking account of nationalism." (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.178) He asserted that for Bengali nationalist writers, "nationalism was inseparable from their aesthetic experience of the phenomenon." (ibid) The distinct narratives, myths and stories that each nation embodies therefore raises the interesting issue of how the various layers of imagined

community to which an individual may feel a personal sense of attachment cohere together in socially meaningful ways. “This inherent plurality of the category imagination,” said Chakrabarty (2000, p.178), “is also what in the end makes it impossible to see the political as something that constitutes a ‘one’ or a whole.” Chakrabarty’s interrogation of the category ‘imagination’ therefore brings into light several points in the relationships between linguistic expression and the formation of national identity and, moreover, a different purview toward understanding modernity and modernism in its context of plurality. It is within this combination of interacting layers of imagined community, of complex and consequential nature, that I also want to explore the discursive performance and legacy of nationhood in the framing of Ethiopian modernism and modernity.

In Ethiopia, the unifying ideology of nationhood between the rulers and the masses was a successful strategy that defined the ways the nation was presented not only as the primary source of loyalty and solidarity, but also as the rallying image in the discourse of modernity. As Chakrabarty asserts with reference to Tagore’s ‘piercing the veil’ exemplar, ahistorical notions of culture that postulate cultural essences allow for various conditions of possibility and/or complex processes of the construction of nation. I am less concerned in this study with what Chakrabarty (2000, p.178) called “any one understanding of the political...to locate the political in historical time” than with “the political that resisted historicization.” I am therefore focusing on the ephemeral ideological formulation of the historical imaginary of the nation that I assert engulfed discourses of modernity. I believe that this will address a critical point in the reading of history that relates itself with subtle images that embedded themselves in historical cultural narratives of the ‘modern’ and consequently, of modernism.

Let me hence examine the national imagination and identification produced in various texts that were written within unifying and concurrently clashing, discursive

practices of nationhood that reworked and rearticulated itself within particular time and place. I will start with earlier texts from Emperor Menelik's<sup>4</sup> proclamation of war (*ketet*) against the Italians in 1896 and from Emperor Haile Selassie's against the same enemy in 1935.<sup>5</sup> I believe that it is imperative to understand the discursive formation of the nation at its earlier stage during Menelik's time and in the subsequent years of Haile Selassie in order to comprehend the Ethiopian project of modernity. This discourse erected the sublime figure of the nation in an expression that had a visual, tactile, sensuous, and emotional dimension. The circulation of print media, particularly in Haile Selassie's reign, facilitated the grand utopian narrative of the nation as a medium for understanding the social space of the modern nation.

**የቀረፀ ግን ትጣላኛለህ አልተውህም ማሪያምን ለዚህ አማላጅ የለኝም  
አጼ ምኒሊክ ተክለጻዲቅ መኩሪያ**

**አሁንም እግዚአብሔር በባህር ወስኖ የሰጠኝን ሀገር የሚያጠፋ ሀይማኖት  
የሚያስለውጥ ጠላት መጥቶብናልና ስንቅህን እያሰናዳህ ተከተለኝ---ያገራ  
የኢትዮጵያ ሕዝብ እስካሁን የበደልኩህ በደል ያለ አይመስለኝም:: ስለዚህ  
ለሀገርህ ለሚስትህ ለልጅህ ለሀይማኖትህ ስትል ጉልበት ያለህ በጉልበትህ ገንዘብ  
ያለህ በገንዘብህ ጉልበትም ገንዘብም የሌለህ ግን በሀዘን እርዳኝ ይህን አዋጅ**

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<sup>4</sup> Menelik II was Emperor of Ethiopia from 1889 until his death in 1913. He proclaimed to be descendant of the legendary Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. Menelik II was a dominant figure of his time in Africa, due to his accomplishments in bringing Ethiopia into the twentieth century. He defeated the Italians in the 1896 Battle of Adwa. This victory has placed him among the great leaders of world history; he maintained his country's independence until 1935. He was originally the ruler of Shoa in central Ethiopia. After the death in 1868 of Emperor Tewodros II, Menelik, with Italian support, gained steady strength and seized the throne after Emperor Yohannes died. In 1889, Menelik concluded the treaty of Wuchali with Italy. However, when he learned that the Italian version of the treaty was different from the Amharic version, essentially making Ethiopia protectorate of Italy, he denounced the agreement. The Italian invasion that followed in 1895-6 was crushed by Menelik's great victory near Adwa with great assistance from his wife, Empress Taitou. Italy was forced to renounce all claims to Ethiopia and to pay an indemnity. He made Addis Ababa his capital. His conquests doubled the size of the country and brought the present day southern Ethiopia, which was largely Muslim into the realm.

<sup>5</sup> The Italians under Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and were ousted by Ethiopian patriots and by the British in 1941. The Emperor went into exile in 1936 to Bath, United Kingdom and did not return until the ousting of the Italians in 1941. The Emperor is well known for his speech at the League of Nations when he appealed to the League for help against the Italians.

**ከሰማህ በሁዋላ ወስልተህ ብትቀር ትቀጣለህ---ሚኒሊክ የኢትዮጵያ ታሪክ ህሩይ ወ/ሰላሴ**

Whoever remains back I will not just leave you alone. I will confront you. In the name of the Virgin Mary, I do not have an intermediary for this. An enemy has come to our country. This enemy is threatening our country that is bordered by water. It is an enemy that will make us convert our religion. My fellow Ethiopians, follow me. I don't think I have treated you badly. Hence, follow me for your country, your wife, your children and your religion. If you are healthy and are able to fight, help me with your strength. If you have money, help me with your money. If you neither have health, strength or money, help me with your meditation and prayer. If you decide to do nothing after you have heard this proclamation, I will punish you. (Menelik as cited in Wolde-Selassie, 2008, p.33)

If we look at this statement from Menelik II, we see a romanticized historical memory in the evocation of the past that assumed significance and greater importance as a political weapon. It was used to foster unity as well as legitimize existing hierarchies of power. As the State's tool of political and cultural hierarchizing of society, it is important to note that the impact of historical memory also depends on the extent to which the larger populace accepts it. In *Memories of State: Politics History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, Eric Davis deliberates the bearing of historical memory in the formation of the Iraqi nation state:

Clearly historical memory must be viewed dialectically. For every memory promoted by the state there will be counter-memory...frequently marked by subaltern groups in their own coded historical texts or oral discourse...that challenges the state's interpretation of the past. (Davis, 2005, p.29)

Davis' postulation surfaced more significantly after 1991 with the takeover of power by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) when the State's previous hegemonic discourse of historical memory was challenged by

subaltern groups. The political power base of the EPRDF posited itself in renouncing the dominant historical imaginary to proliferate different forms of memory. It is not the intent of this study to engage the tensions and contradictions of contemporary constructions of memory that bases itself on ethnic differentiations and that reflects unresolved issues of cultural pluralism. It is nonetheless essential to not only comprehend the origin of the current claim of contestation because it plays a critical role in the subversion of the authentic tradition of the nation and its historical mission, but also to understand the social base of Ethiopia's modernity and modern nation building.

It is worth going back to Menelik II's and Haile Selassie's version of *ketet* and its attempt to appropriate historical memory that was designed to foster a specific national identity. By saying *In the name of Mary, there is no intermediary for this*; Menelik II was rallying support by imagining the nation in the spiritual, familial and cultural social sphere. The Virgin Mary occupies a special place in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. She is an intermediary between heaven and earth because Christ became incarnate through her. She contained in her womb a divinity that cannot be contained. When Menelik said *in the name of the Virgin Mary I don't have an intermediary for this*, he was saying that even the mediation of Mary, the most impenetrable of all mysteries, could not help those who fail to defend the nation live through such blasphemy. The Virgin who recognizes evil and who has pity on all souls who do not know the Kingdom of Love will not have mercy for any form of defamation of the nation. The close analogy of the nation and the divine is spoken with its paramount validity and anybody that is uncertain of this 'truth' sins against the Holy Ghost. This unity of the nation with the divine was of a proprietary nature, a vested interest, something in the nature of intangible assets which embodied the nation's population and resources.

**ስለዚህ ለሀገርህ ለሚስትህ ለልጅህ ለሀይማኖትህ ስትል ጉልበት ያለህ  
በጉልበትህ ገንዘብ ያለህ በገንዘብህ ጉልበትም ገንዘብም የሌለህ ግን  
በሀዘንህ እርዳኝ ይህ አዋጅ ከሰማህ በሁዋላ ወስልተህ ከዚህ ብተቀር  
ትቀጣለህ**

Help me for your wife, for your religion and for your country. If you are healthy and are able to fight, help me with your strength. If you have money, help me with your money. If you neither have health, strength or money, help me with your meditation and prayer. If you decide to do nothing after you had heard this proclamation I will punish you. (Menelik II as cited in Wolde-Selassie, 2008, p.34)

Menelik II as the spiritual and moral leader forges a personal and collective identity at the moment of truth when the nation was faced with the ominous calamity of war. ‘For your wife, for your country, and for your religion’ brings to mind what Teshale Tebebu (1995, p.32) called “the sacred trinity of Ethiopian war nationalism.” Tebebu has argued that Ethiopia attained sovereignty despite the colonial history of Africa because of the country’s possession of firearms imported from Europe, the existence of an armed body that was separate from the rest of the population, and moreover, because of the cultural unity instituted by the Orthodox Church that contributed to a formidable sense of identity. Menelik’s inference of ‘I the nation’ also evokes a personal reinforcement of a hegemonic construction of Ethiopia as a unified, inclusive, imagined community and the monarchy as a conceptual origin of the nation. Hence, wartime struggles provided powerful representations of the unity of the nation and what it meant to be an exemplary patriotic Ethiopian.

A dichotomously paradoxical and vexing nationalist discourse emerges in Haile Selassie’s version of *ketet* where the legitimizing concepts of the nation are not only cultural and mythical, but they also shaped a symbolic field of feelings and experiences

that served as a vision of national identity. The idea of the nation was contingent on a cultural politics that was used to advance an unexamined category of ‘Ethiopianness.’

ሽማግሌውን አገራችን ነጻነትዋን አጥፍቼ እወስዳለሁ በማለት ስለተመኘ ለማጥፋት በመታሰባችን እጅግ አዝናለሁ ያገራ የኢትዮጵያ ሰው ጉልበት የሌለህ በሀዘንህ እርዳኝ በጉልበትም በሀዘንም የምትረዳበት ምክንያት ለሀይማኖትህና ለነጻነትህ እንደ አባትና እንደ ልጅ እየተሳበ ሲረዳዳ ለኖረው ለንጉሠነገስትህ ቀርቶ ለነጻነትህ ለሚያሳየው ባንዲራህ ስትል ነው በውርደትና በመረረ ሀዘን የሚኖር በከብቱና በንብረቱ በመቃብሩ መሬት እንኳ የሚያዝበት ለዘሩ የሚተላለፍ ባርነትን ወርሶ የሚኖር ሕዝብ ማለት ነው። --- ከዘር ሲተላለፍ ከማይሞት ስም ጋር የሚኖር የዘላለም እስር ነውና ኢታሊያ ምንም በመሣሪያው ቢኮራ ሞት የጋራ መሆኑ የሚታወቅ ነው። --- በቤትህ ላይ ሆነህ መመከት አቅቶህ ለአገርህ ለኢትዮጵያ ሞት ብትነፍጋት ደምህንም ሳታፈስ ብትቀር በፈጣሪህ የምትወቀስበት ነውና የተለመደ የገነት ልብህን ሳታበራ ወደፊት የሚቆይህን ታሪክህን እያሰብህ ጠንክረህ ለመዋጋት ቆርጠህ ተነሣ።

I feel very sad that the enemy is wishing to destroy our ancient country and her civilization. My fellow Ethiopians, if you do not have health and strength, help me with your prayers. You are helping me with both your strength and meditation because of the sanctity of your religion, your freedom, your Emperor and moreover your flag. One who lives with shame and grief, one who cannot even dictate over his own livestock, his property and his grave is one who has inherited serfdom and slavery. One who cannot have destiny over his own grave is one who condemns the next generation with slavery. Although Italy is proud of its arms, we all know that death is there for all. If you cannot defend yourself from the invasion of your own house, if you are denying your country death, if you don't spill blood for your country, you will be condemned by your Creator. Remember the paradise that will be reopened if you die an honorable death. Remember the history that awaits you. Rise up and defend yourself. Do not deny your country death itself. (Haile Selassie as cited in Wolde-Selassie, 2008, p.35)

In Haile Selassie's *ketet*, the corporeal metaphor of the nation in categories of imagery that inculcated determinate moral values about the representations of death and the embodiment of the nation portrayed how the nation was imagined. I wish to draw attention to how the troping of death, which is an extension of the physical self, opened up space for engagement in narratives of national consciousness where dying for one's country resonated as a critical tool in building a sense of collective identity. There are several metaphors and metaphorical allusions to death in Haile Selassie's *ketet* that reflect powerful narratives of death, symbolizing a variety of losses and frustrated desires, both tangible and abstract. The theological understanding of death in the Orthodox Church implies that with Christ's resurrection from the dead, death was defeated and paradise reopened, the gift of life is offered to us by Christ's death and resurrection, by which the powers of sin and death are overcome.

One of the many deaths a country would encounter is hence to be denied of this type of death that was bestowed with life through Christ's crucifixion and ascension. *If you deny your nation, death itself*, said Haile Selassie, *you will be cursed by your Creator, and will be ostracized by your ancestors*. After all, Christ said: "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." (John 11:25-26)

Haile Selassie's *ketet* therefore inferred a nation that dies in a horrible and frightening way without the spiritual vision of eternal joy and blessedness. Positioning corporeality at the core of Ethiopian survival and identity, Haile Selassie's *ketet* entailed allegorical figurations of death where the life of the nation had a corporeal grounding and where the nation and the embodied subject collided in a collective understanding and consciousness of spiritual interpretations. The entanglements of subjectivities, bodies, and nation through the category of death created an imagined nation that shaped its influence on discursive formations, which dominated and often overwhelmed the

fundamental existential aspect of human actors who populated the nation. Both Chakrabarty and Chatterjee have argued the conceptualization of nation against the universal scheme of imagination. Arguing that most people have, among other things, a language, a culture and a religion that they are partial to, both thinkers look at the creative and powerful results of the nationalist imagination apart from political nationalism. It is these situational exigencies that contribute to the collective whole of the nationalist imagination that I have attempted to engage through references to Menelik II's and Haile Selassie's version of *ketet*.

I have stated that for any discussion about what Ethiopian modernity might mean and what the experience of Ethiopian modernity might represent, it is important to comprehend the nation as an object that is constituted discursively. It is not possible to even begin to discuss the profound ways in which Ethiopian modernists engaged notions of identity without discussing the myths and ideals of the nation that are contained within this discursive construction. The ways that the universalist discourse of modernity has both formed and circumscribed the notion of the nation can never be understood without reference to this pairing of the non-modern (mythical) to the modern (objectivist) and to the possibility of their simultaneous coexistence. Combined with historicist and objectivist conduct, this non-objectivist way of seeing the nation was necessary to specifically revive a distinct historical memory that upheld the continuity of core myths and traditions. Clearly, when *Berhanena Selam* articulated the concept of nationhood in the beginning discourse of Ethiopian modernity, the theorization of power and the conceptualization of knowledge was freely interchanged with the nation that was as much an abstract ideal as well as a political entity.

The distinct role *Berhanena Selam* played in the foundational articulation of Ethiopian modernity was very crucial in shaping its evolution. The focus in this chapter is the newspaper's role in generating questions on the political, conceptual and social

processes of Ethiopian modernity with the nation as its foundational framework, to problematize the multiple and changing location of alterity. Established in 1924, *Berhanena Selam* was a weekly newspaper founded by the then Crown Prince Taffari Mekonnen, later to become Emperor Haile Selassie. When scrutinizing the contribution of the thinkers of *Berhanena Selam*, historians of Ethiopia have long been interested in the dialogue of modern economic, administrative and educational spheres that these writers engaged with and the newspaper having been a modernizing force that was keen to review and regenerate culture and society. While this was true, one might yet also consider the changing perceptions of monarchy, nationalism, memory and modernity in these writings that propagated hierarchy as it sought democracy, elitism as it aspired for egalitarianism, and mysticism as it promoted skepticism. For instance, on the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie in January, 1931, the newspaper wrote of the cosmic imperative of the monarchy and its mystic moral quest that was important to the existential survival of the nation.

**ይህ የከበረና የተመሰገነ ታላቅ የዘውድ ቤል ዳዊትም በትንቢት ቃል ተናግሮት ነበር። ---እግዚአብሔር ለኢትዮጵያ በሰጣት ተስፋ መንግሥት ከቤትዋ እንዳይወጣ ከቀዳማዊ ምኒሊክ አንስቶ እስከ ዳግማዊ ምኒሊክ ድረስ ከመንግሥት ላይጠፋበት የኖረች ዛሬም ይህን የመስለ ገናና ግርማዊ ንጉሰነገሥት ቀዳማዊ ሀይለስላሴን ሰጣት።**

This respected grand coronation is told by David himself as a prophecy. God has given hope for Ethiopia that government would always be there and this is exemplified by Menelik I to Menelik II and now we see that Ethiopia is bestowed with the benevolence of Emperor Haile Selassie I. (*Berhanena Selam*, January 4, 1931)

Here, the monarchy is presented as the most obvious and influential marker of Ethiopian identity and nationhood. The monarchy was the proof of continuity of the

nation through time, which ran from Menelik I, the son of Sheba and Solomon, to Menelik II, the predecessor of Haile Selassie I. A sacral notion of kingship anchored this sacred nation of divine kings and queens and the citizen was urged to identify with a nation that had evolved over a long history of moral values of benevolence. Modern self consciousness derived from a utopic view of the monarch as a repository of reason. Again, the coronation of the Emperor was commemorated as:

ኢትዮጵያ ዘወትር አልማዝ ነበረች ግን የተሸፈነች አልማዝ ነበረች።  
ይህም መጋረጃ ዘወትር በፊትዋ እንደጋረዳት ይኖር ነበርና ስለዚህ  
ከቀረው ዓለም ክፍል ሁሉ በጣም ለይቷት ኖረ። ከአገርዋም ውስጥ  
የስልጣን ብርሀን እንዳይገባባት ከለከላት ወደ ባህር የሚጠጋው መንገድ  
እንደ ሩቅ ሆነ። ይህም ጽኑ መጋረጃ በመጀመሪያ ንጉሠ ነገሥት  
ዳግማዊ ሚኒሊክ ገለጥ አድርገውት መጋረጃው በጣም ስላልተገለጠ  
ጥቂት በጥቂት የስልጣኔ ብርሀን ሰልቶ ገባ። ነገር ግን በእግዚአብሔር  
ፍቃድ ቀዳማይ ሀይለስላሴ ለኢትዮጵያ ስላመጣላት እርሳቸው ይህን  
መጋረጃ በፍፁም ገላልጠው የሙሉ ፀሀይ ብርሀን በአገሪቱ ላይ ሁሉ  
አበራ።

ኢትዮጵያ እና ኢሮፕ በፍቅር በአንድነት አድርገው በአንድ ገበታና  
በአንድ ሰው አገናኝተውልሀልና ክብር ተቀብለው አገራችን ኢትዮጵያን  
በአንድ ገበታና በአንድ ሰው አገናኝተው እንደዚህ ያለ መንግሥት  
አስቀድሞም ያልተገኘ ወደፊትም የማይገኝ

Ethiopia had always been a diamond but nevertheless she was a concealed diamond. This curtain that had always covered her face had alienated her from the rest of the world. This curtain prevented the coming of light into the country. This curtain was first opened by Emperor Menelik II but nevertheless the curtain was not fully opened and therefore the entry of civilization was scanty. Because of God's will, Emperor Haile Selassie had been bestowed by God to the country and he has opened the curtain fully and hence sunshine and light in the country. Ethiopia and Europe have come together because of one man. This type of man and government, we have never had and will be hard to find in the future. (*Berhanena Selam*, January 4, 1931)

The fashioning of the Ethiopian monarchy's public image not only was presented as the official emblem of the nation, but also as a modern, civilized and civilizing institution that responded to modern ideas and practices. So deeply implicated were the categories of modern thought with imperial ideology and the sacred nation, that the newspaper gave significance to the progress of the West at the same time it questioned the adequacy of the West's ideology for the life of the nation, without the moral quest and activism of a divine monarch who was responsible for leading the masses. Modernity was thus part of a transcendent kingly moral insight that shaped the vision of an ideal society that had to be realized. The incorporation within mainstream nationalism of a discourse of the modern nation—a discourse founded in an irreducible monarchical patriarchy in which the ruler, by his exemplary moral and divine qualities, expressed the collective will encapsulated the thinking of early modernist intellectuals of *Berhanena Selam*.

What makes *Berhanena Selam* interesting then was its attempt to achieve an organic unity between the cultural, moral and social spheres, a unity it pontificated to be dependent upon the imperial institution and its ideological production of the imaginary of the nation. What also makes it interesting was that it had this ability to provide an alternative approach to modernity, chiefly aimed at technological and economic development, without presenting an urgent need to root out imperial ideology. The irony is that the State made effective use of the narrative of modernity to expand its own powers while the intelligentsia robbed itself of an appropriate reckoning of the 'modern' in the genealogies of the 'modern' as experienced in the non-West. At stake was the question of whose modernity or whose terms would dominate the values, forms, ideologies and histories associated with the 'modern.' This was particularly felt

in the genealogy of the ‘modern’ after the Italian occupation and the Emperor Haile Selassie’s return from exile in 1941.

I nevertheless seek to go beyond a simplistic understanding of the elite as homogenous and as mere tools of the State who enhanced a fictitious narrative of the divine nation. On the contrary, I argue that the intellectual assumed divinity to be real, objectively definable and desirable. Progress only meant the movement of science and industry. Progress was not meant to tamper with the grace of the divine nation and its benevolent monarch. His allegiance to imperial power and tradition intact, the intellectual’s engagement with the ‘modern’ was therefore a genuine hope that the concept of progress and development could be extracted from the monopoly of the West, and that Ethiopia could become an equal participant in the community of the modern world. To that process, the intellectuals of *Berhanena Selam* set a discursive tradition of the ‘modern’ that fore-grounded a modern-oriented concept of culture, history and progress that was intertwined with a distinct imagination of the nation.

One could say that these intellectuals were organic in the Gramscian sense, openly recognizing their location within the imperial dominant ideology and functioning in the perpetuation of imperial rule while yet circulating local issues that connect to the people and their experiences. “It can be observed,” said Gramsci (1989, p.302), “that the organic intellectuals which every new class creates alongside itself and elaborates in the course of its development, are for the most part ‘specializations’ of partial aspects of the primitive activity of the new social type which the new class has brought into prominence.”

It is also important to again note here Dipesh Chakrabarty’s critique of historicism that regards “rational outlook, the spirit of science and free enquiry as constituting the progressive aspects of modernity.” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.243) By drawing on the writings of Jomo Kenyatta, Anthony Appiah, and D.D Kosambi,

Chakrabarty has argued that cultural production from the postcolony is judged from a teleological notion of progress which maps hierarchies of value that privileges the legacy of Euro American modernist concepts and discounts “the question of hetero-temporality from the history of the modern subject.” (ibid) Chakrabarty (ibid) said that strategies in the social sciences “seek to hide from view the fragmentary nature of the ‘now’ the investigating subject inhabits.” Taking into account the question of magic and superstition in the works of Kenyatta, Appiah and Kosambi, Chakrabarty has urged us to think in terms of “the plurality that inheres in the now, the lack of totality, the constant fragmentation that constitutes one’s present.” (ibid) His dispute is again with the historicist and ethnographic approach of viewing that he said “involves the use of a sense of anachronism in order to convert objects, institutions, and practices with which we have lived relationships into relics of other times.” (ibid) He thinks that this “aptitude to formulate a ‘single historical context’ is the enabling condition of modern historical consciousness, the capacity to see the past as gone and reified into an object of investigation.” (ibid)

I again brought Chakrabarty’s argument into discourse in order to reckon the Ethiopian intellectual’s consciousness that was motivated through references to the nation’s past, its genealogy of divine kings and queens that rooted itself to Solomon and Sheba, and its ultimate truth that was fully discovered in the experience of the modern subject. This will be particularly discussed in the official nationalism of Emperor Haile Selassie where the spiritual divinity of the nation served as a means to conceptualize modernity and modernism. Although one could get wary of the naïve assumptions of progress within the *Berhanena Selam* writers’ concept of the ‘modern’ and particularly over the nature over their normative usage of the ‘modern,’ one cannot discount the newspaper’s social and cultural phenomena that highlighted the trajectory of the

concept of the ‘modern,’ which led to its early constitution and to its different formations in subsequent years.

Chakrabarty’s insightful analysis of the category imagination in Tagore’s ‘piercing the veil’ exemplar and in the conception of the supernatural through Kenyatta, Appiah, and Kosambi, comes to play in the peculiar way the nation was imagined in Ethiopia. The nation which could be read as both human through its subjects and divine through the monarchical state articulated the double meaning of imagination as a representation of subjectivist sight and a non-representational non-subjectivist vision. A real phenomenon that cannot be understood as false or unreal, the imaginary of the nation was an authentic intermediary among cultural producers that reconciled various forces to permeate mainstream imagination.

Consequently, the modern history of Ethiopia cannot be seen without this source of identification. Although ambivalences and hierarchies were clearly reproduced in the encounters between people and ideas about the nation, the nation historically remained an important frame through which these ambivalences were reconciled. As stated in the introductory chapter, I argue here that although the notion of the nation remained to be a fundamental framework, this intimate connection of the nation with that of the Emperor was somewhat tampered after the Italian occupation despite Haile Selassie’s rhetoric of official nationalism. This nation, which stood in all its divinity because of its kings and queens who descended from Solomon, defeated the Italians in Adwa but was overpowered by the same enemy in 1935. It was the intellectual who was particularly befuddled by this conquest. I discuss this when I address ideas of modernity and modernism during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie and the Emperor’s clinical response to the damage done to the concept of the nation that was directly intertwined to his power, which was transcendental and cosmic.

Besides *Berhanena Selam's* narrative of progress and development, it is noteworthy that the paper was also a space where the activities that went along with European modernity were visually displayed. These displays functioned as important aspects of the cultural construction that framed the social world of cultural elites with advanced discursive powers. Correspondence between style, aesthetic and culture, which took for granted the categories of European derived modernism, were displayed in the advertisement pages of the paper and were intimately linked to ideas of modern identity or progress. Advertisements such as the following inundated the paper and constructed the ideas of the modern and civilized self.

*Do you want to drink whiskey to be healthy?  
Campbell's grand liquor –tested by doctors ---produced in England and  
particularly in Scotland.  
Estop cognac from Cognac France—one that gives health –found at Monsieur  
Elias Hesnlian.*

It is important to address the notion of alterity that magnified the anxieties of the *Berhanena Selam* intellectuals. How did these intellectuals reflect on the historically constructed divide between the West and the non-West? The dimension of this articulation in the social and political imaginary was intensified and motivated by an acknowledgement of 'Otherness.' This sense of marginality nevertheless fell short of problematizing the body of thought that qualified and authorized those categories of knowledge that privileged the West and denied the plurality and historicity of alterities. I argue that the imagination of the nation that was replete with exceptionalism reduced sentiments of alterity just as it exacerbated its sensitivity. The question of how Europe could surpass Ethiopia dominated discourse just as the question of regress. Nevertheless, the scrutiny of the regimes of truth in which alterities have emerged, deployed, and transformed were not configured. The broader discursive field of alterity

was instead subsumed with changes in traditional cultures and beliefs that blocked technology and development, and with the benevolent Emperor who was paving the way for this great nation's rapid advancement that would equal that of the West. Marginality gave these intellectuals a shared sensibility with the rest of the community.

The intellectual therefore talked about the importance of bringing the nation together with Europe, with the supposition that the nation should rally together to come to par with Europe, and how Europe's technology was the symbol of civilization. It was repeatedly emphasized that Europe's technology had contributed to the intellectual pursuit of humankind and that transformation was imperative for Ethiopia to tackle the dominance of Europe. Centering on multidimensional ideological issues which lay culture into two distinctive spheres of the material and spiritual, the intellectuals of *Berhanena Selam* deliberated on material that revered the science and technology of Western civilization, on Ethiopia's marginality within that domain, and on the monarchy's instigated spiritual realm to overcome this feeling of marginality.

In this regards, it is important to turn toward an examination of the contributions of Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn who has truly elaborated on the problematics of Ethiopian modernity through the deliberation of marginality. He was a true pioneer who has reflected on the national, political, conceptual and social processes of Ethiopian modernity. Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn engaged with the many different values, ideologies and histories associated with the 'modern.' Although some argue that he was infatuated with European modernity and maligned traditional values and beliefs, I argue that he propagated the totalizing concept of progress while also reckoning with local particularities.<sup>6</sup> What makes him especially interesting is his contemplation on tropes of

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<sup>6</sup> Although there is no evidence in writing that critiques Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn's obsession with Europe, he has been a topic of conversation in the intellectual circle of Addis Ababa University as one who adored European values. There had also been radio programs with university professors who discussed the fate of Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn. For instance, a program aired recently on FM 102.1 with Ato Tomas Belay conveyed such sentiment.

modernity as early as 1914, which was earlier than the *Berhanena Selam* intellectuals who started publishing the paper in 1924. I consider him not only to be the first intellectual to have brought forward and problematized key concepts of nationhood and its accessories, but also to have been one of the few intellectuals to date who have critically looked into Ethiopian modernity.

Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn was born in 1886 in Adwa and lost his father at the age of seven in the Battle of Metema.<sup>7</sup> As a child, he joined the Swedish mission school in Massawa, and it was at the port of Massawa that Baykedagn and his friends once toured a German ship with permission of the captain. The ship had left Massawa, traveled a great distance, and already sailed ashore when the captain discovered that Baykedagn had not disembarked in Massawa. Upon the ship's arrival to Austria, Baykedagn was given to a wealthy family there who adopted him. The family sent him to study medicine in Berlin where he finished his education at Berlin University. Baykedagn came back to Ethiopia after his education and wrote two of his seminal works, *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia* and *Yemengestna Yehezab Astedader* (Government and People) He died at the young age of 33.

Looking at these two works, especially *Yemengestena Yehezab Astedader*, one could deduce that Baykedagn framed the space of political and social thought in the production of state formation in Ethiopia by not only focusing on significant trajectories of the nation, but by also understanding the issues and challenges confronted by modern nation-building projects. In this study, I will solely focus on his work *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia*, as I believe this work not only dealt with the problematics of socioeconomic conditions, but also questioned the adherence of a

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<sup>7</sup> Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) was defeated on March 9 1889 by the Mahdi's successor Adallahi Ibn Muhammed at the Battle of Gallabat. Following Emperor Tewodros' death, he was crowned under the name of Yohannes. He established Mekele as his capital when he relocated his power base from Debre Berhan to Mekele. Yohannes was a committed Christian, nationalist, diplomatic and a great military leader.

society to selected values. He began *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia* with a criticism on the writing of history:

ታሪክን መማር ለብዙ ሰው ይበጃል። ለቤተመንግሥት መኮንን ግን የግድ ያስፈጋል። የድሮ ሰዎች ስህተትንና በጎነትን አይቶ ለመንግሥቱና ለሀገርህ የሚበጀውን ነገር ያውቅ ዘንድ። የታሪክ ትምህርት ግን የሚጠቅም የእውነተኛ ታሪክ ሲሆን ነው---እውነተኛንም ታሪክ ለመጻፍ ቀላል ነገር አይደለም የሚከተሉትን ሶስት የእግዚአብሔር ስጦታዎች ያስፈልጋልና በጀመሪያ ተመልካች ልቦና የተደረገውን ለማስተው ሁለተኛ የማያዳላ አእምሮ በተደረገው ለመፍረድ ሶስተኛ የጠራ የቋንቋ አገባብ የተመለከቱትንና የፈረዱትን ለማስታወቅ። የአገራችን የታሪክ ፀሀፊዎች ግን በዚህ ላይ ሀጢአት ይሰራሉ። በትልቁ ፋንታ ትንሹን ይመለከታሉ---ጉልበት የሌለው ብዙ ንጉስ ኖረዋል የኖረም ይሆናል ነገር ግን የታሪካችን ቃል የእውነት ከሆነ ዘንድ እንዲሁ በብዙ የቅዱሳንና ያጋንንትን እርዳታ እንደ ኢትዮጵያችን ነገሥታት ገዥዎች የሚያስፈልገው ሰው በአለም ታሪክ ከቶ አልተሰማም።

It is good to learn history. For officials of the palace, it is even more important to learn history so that one can know what is good or bad for the country. History is nevertheless useful if it has truth in it. To write an objective and truthful history is nevertheless not easy. You need the following three God given gifts: 1) One has to observe objectively, 2) One has to have a fair judgment of things so that one refrains from being partial to things that he favors and 3) One has to be proficient in language so that one can translate what is seen and judged. Our historians however sin on all these categories. Instead of looking at the larger picture, they look into smaller details. If our history is true and partial, our Emperors are going to need all the help that they can get from mythical allusions (implying that there had never been a true historical analysis of our Emperors and that our Emperors make up their own histories with each successive regime). (Baykedagn, 1914, p.13)

Baykedagn's argument sheds light over the nature of historical knowledge, which includes a critical look at objectivity in looking at the past and at the production of history as a contested truth that could be manipulated to serve those in power. Throughout this text, Baykedagn questions the sort of understanding Ethiopian history had of the past and examined the difference between historical narratives and fictional narratives. He stated: "During the lifetime of Emperors, they have not looked at history without fear and hence we have not looked at history without that fear. We have yet to be free." (Baykedagn, 1914, p.18) He discussed the Ethiopian past as being examined under a notion where prior Emperors were glorified and where a counter-history and a new historical analysis developed as absolutely legitimate with each successive regime. For him, history was re-invented and remodeled from the dominant subjects' point of view. Moreover, his insight on the criticality of the present, as best understood in its relationship with the past, was presented as imperative to a correct configuration of a viable historical epistemology.

In this text, he expressed that the present of collective identity was inherently political in that any historical interpretation had a connection to the experience of the present time. For him, individuals were both collectively and individually embedded in an ongoing history while also being linked to the present time. The collective had physicality within the space of historical images where it acknowledged and recognized itself. Questions of objectivity in history, as they have been embraced and contested, and of historical claims and narratives without the mediation between the subject and the object of power, are therefore critiqued by Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn in *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia*. Baykedagn's analysis in this seminal work can be equated to Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*.

Placing the West's failure to acknowledge the most successful and first slave revolt in history, the Haitian Revolution, Michel-Rolph Trouillot has also offered a

perspective on how power operates in the making and recording of history. Trouillot argues that the Haitian Revolution had been silenced despite the abundance of facts that was and continues to be available in the production of an objective history of revolt. He has said that the revolution was “unthinkable in the framework of Western thought,” (Trouillot, 1997, p.82) and argued that silencing the past becomes pertinent not to disrupt the dominant structure. Trouillot concludes that the past is silenced in the same way by which history is created, and that any production of history is shaped by the relevance and perspective of the present. Baykedagn also pointed to this criticality of the writings of history and its paradoxical relationship between present and past, which became particularly contentious in the history of Ethiopia. What makes Baykedagn’s view on history particularly important is that it was written as early as 1914 when the contestation of history’s objectivity had been the focus of academic debate only in the recent past.

Besides his critique of history, what makes Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn interesting to the discourse of Ethiopian modernity is also his perennial anxiety to ‘Otherness.’ Throughout *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia*, he persistently talked about *aemero yelelew hezb* (people who do not have a thinking mind) and *temehert yelelew hezb* (people who are not educated). (Baykedagn, 1914, p.19) In one section of the text, he even regretted the fact that Ethiopia had never been colonized, thinking that colonialism at least would have laid the infra-structural foundation of technology and progress. How then, can this feeling of ‘Otherness’ that prevails throughout the text be considered key to the dialogue of modernity? I argue that contrary to the popular perception of the ‘Other’ and of ‘Otherness,’ Baykedagn’s angst apprehended and opened for the first time in Ethiopian modern history a variety of investigation to the perception of modernity. He primarily expressed ‘Otherness’ to disrupt the realm of politics in a radical way. Baykedagn incessantly talked about the need of systems and structures in a celebratory

discourse on Europe, but also in an angry discourse that denigrated his own country's lack of European enlightened edifice. This anger was one that nevertheless prompted him to intensively discuss the social philosophy behind Ethiopia's backwardness and the socio-political frameworks of modernity that would take Ethiopia out of this relapse. It was also this anger toward 'Otherness' that makes Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn the only early intellectual who criticized the monopolist state tradition, the government's arcane power strategies and the provincialism of conventions. For instance, when talking about Emperor's Menelik's illness and how the nobility took its entire army to the capital not only to visit the king but also to preempt any type of coup d'état by the local army if it was left behind, Baykedagn stated:

አእምሮ ባላቸው ህዝቦች ዘንድ ግን መንግሥት ማለት ማህበር ማለት ነው። ንጉሳቸውም የማህበራቸው አለቃ ማለት ነው። ስለዚህ ንጉሱ የፈቀደውን ያደርግ ዘንድ አይችልም። ስልጣኑ የሕዝቡ ማህበር በደነገገው ህግና ወግ የተወሰነ ነው። የማህበር አለቃ ሲሞት ማህበር እንደማይፈረስ እንዲሁ ንጉሳቸው በሞት አእምሮ ያላቸው ህዝቦች ገድ የላቸውም---አእምሮ ያለው ህዝብ ስርዓት የለውም። ስርዓትም የሌለው ህዝብ የደለደለ ሀይል የለውም። የሀይል ምንጭ ስርአት እንጂ የሰራዊት ብዛት አይደለም።

With people who have thinking minds, a government is a social institution and their king is in charge of that social institution. Hence, the king cannot do whatever he desires to do. The power of the king depends upon the institution's bylaws. If the king dies, the institution does not die. If people do not have thinking minds, people do not have structures. If there is no structure, there is no power because the source of power is institutions and structures, and not the number of its soldiers. (Baykedgan, 1914, p.21)

Because of these types of assertions, some say that Baykedagn's absolute infatuation with Europe and adamant fear that his country may never reach Europe's development discounted the Ethiopian subject's articulation of self and identity. They say that this tended to foreground Baykedagn's insatiable desire to reach European modernity in a solidly Eurocentric frame of consciousness. While this was true, Baykedagn also talked about the importance of the institutionalization of ideas, the imperatives of education, and the criticality of systems for any project of modernity. His feeling of 'Otherness' hence interrogated several propositions of politically charged ethos that attended to the narrative of the 'Other.' His 'Otherness' was a site for critical, ethical, and socio-political cultural exploration. Nevertheless, it is probably appropriate to say that while he talked about the importance of these factors, he also disregarded the notion of an identity that is consistently reshaped, rewritten, and re-narrated by the very 'Europe' that he endeavored to appropriate. In a European mode of thought, he may have objectified the subject in a discourse that justified and always found alibis and subterfuges in institutions. It is true that the 'Otherness' of the 'Other', is a historical and historicized attitude, and that understanding the epistemological relationship to alterity is fundamental in the construction of modernity.

I nevertheless reflect on 'Otherness' in Baykedagn's work as a consideration that what can be called modernity and, consequently, a revolution from alterity, resided within and originated from the 'Other.' It is from this context that I want to look into his angst toward 'Otherness.' Furthermore, I also want to explore this 'Otherness' within the contexts of both identity and difference where any exclusion or difference from what he considered the civilized world, which mainly referred to Europe was dialectically created, it included the values and meaning of European culture as it rejected its power to define. His discursive route was based on two psychological elements. It was constituted of an unproblematized notion of the subaltern subject

whose voice needed to be given expression, and of the implicit inclination of a reductive subaltern subjectivity. This subjectivity not only repeated the violence of representation characteristic of the very backwardness against which it was set, but also, more importantly, a subversive voice which wrote back against the ‘Other’ from one’s own position of cultural identification and origin. I therefore argue that Baykedagn’s reading of cultural and historical phenomena in terms of ‘Otherness,’ although not explicitly articulated, reconstituted the identity of the Ethiopian ‘Other.’ While this ‘Other’ functioned within the means of production of the dominant European culture, it also ultimately became a Western import, or a hybrid form, uniting local conceptions with Western conceptions.

Baykedagn was sympathetic to Menelik II while he critiqued his inefficient system. When he talked about Tewodros,<sup>8</sup> he talked about the Emperor’s valor and courage. The nature of the discourse he constructed in order to account for a cultural space that, in his opinion, escaped the West was from within the conception of the culture itself that he wrote off. When he spoke of Ethiopia, he configured and represented it in the terms of his own mindset, which came into existence in and through relation to his own culture in contradictory and conflictual ways, and which employed discourse quite unlike, even opposed to, those of European modes of thought. For instance, he states:

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<sup>8</sup> In 1855, Kassa Hailu declared himself ‘king of kings’ and was crowned under the name of Tewodros II. Tewodros is known to have re-unified Ethiopia by subjugating regional princes. He imprisoned Prince Menelik later to be Emperor Menelik II who refused to recognize Tewodros as Emperor. Tewodros used force to pursue his goal of re-unifying the country. He was unpopular for using force. Nevertheless, he successfully overthrew feudal lords and distributed land to the peasants and ordinary people. His efforts were to modernize his army and establish an independent and sovereign Ethiopia. He contacted a few European countries, specifically Great Britain for support but he never got the support that he asked for. He was especially offended by the British for not supporting him. He became angry and took several British envoys as prisoners in a final desperate attempt to get support. Queen Victoria wrote to him asking for the release of the prisoners but Tewodros refused to release the prisoners and this led to the expedition of British troops to a place called Mekdela where the Emperor was in 1869. The Emperor was defeated at the Battle of Mekdela when he committed suicide.

የሸዋ ንጉሥ ግን ለህዝባቸው ያባቱን ልማድ መረቁለት። አዲስ ነገር እንዲቀበላቸውም አልተከራከሩትም ወንበዴውም ሁሉ እንዲያርፍላቸው ስለ ስርዓት የሚበክል ጎራዴ አልመዘዙበትም ነገር ግን በቸርነታዊ እጃቸው ወደ አደባባያቸው ስበው መች አስጠኑት ሹሞቻቸው ግብር ብለው ከሚያመጡላቸው ተከት ሲሳይም መገቡት። በራሱ ላይ ቆብን ጭኖ ወይም ትልቁን ሻሽ ጠምጥሞ ወይም መቁጠሪያ ይዞ ወደ አዲስ አበባ ቤተ መንግሥት ሊለምን የሄደም ሰው ሁሉ ባዶ እጁን አይመለስም ነበር ስለዚህ ትልቁም ትንሹም ሚኒሊክ ያልገባ ይላልም። ስለዚህም ጎጃሞች እንደማሉት አጼ ምኒሊክ በቸርነታቸው ዝቅቧ ቢባል ውሸት አይደለም። ይህ ማለፊያ ነው ያስመሰግናልም ግን ትምህርትን ግለጽ አያሰኝም።

The king of Shoa (implying to Menelik and Shoa is the Amhara highland) gave his people his father's tradition. He did not force upon his people new ideas. He did not fear them with the power of his sword. He instead fed his people with all his kindness. Whoever came to his capital, whether it was a monk or a priest, did not go back empty handed. It was because of this that people loved Menelik. If the Gojjammee (a province in Ethiopia) said that Menelik ruled through his kindness, it will not be a lie. This is fine and this is respectable but it nevertheless has not brought education and progress to the country. (Baykedagn, 1914, p.22)

One can see here Baykedagn's imagination and narrative that evoked a sense of a common cultural memory. Menelik II's kindness is reckoned in an expression of thought that was Ethiopian, and also within the context of a society that perceived its monarch as the dominant frame of the nation. Baykedagn was hence confined in a web of thought that could not break with concepts, values, forms and ideologies that constituted the genealogy of his country. Needless to say, Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn was the first modernist who spoke of European modernity from three major frameworks of European modernist thought. First, he foregrounded the concept of secular discourse in a country where the Orthodox Church played a pivotal role in the philosophical and

practical application of knowledge. He brought forth a secular discourse that in its nature and its bearing constituted an analysis of social and political life, which was unusual to the Church's tenor of discourse. Secondly, he initiated the concept of the institutionalization of ideas. This contribution proposed that social institutions provided the philosophic framework of enlightenment reason that was freed from the tenacity of the subject and that was objectified and empowered by consensual institutions.

The third feature of Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn's modernity was, as discussed above, his deliberation of modernity from a standpoint of 'Otherness.' It is true that the concept of 'Otherness' can be contentious and may constitute several interpretations. How is the 'Other' constructed historically and symbolically? Do 'self' and 'Other' translate unavoidably into 'us' and 'them'? Is knowledge of the 'Other' always rooted in a form of colonization and domination? Can the 'Other' know or speak of itself? These are questions that are primarily sought to critique and acknowledge the notion of 'Otherness.'

Taking these questions into consideration, I want to assert first that he was an intellectual who defied the mythical construction of modernity that was prevalent among later modernists like the *Berhanena Selam* writers, and also that he was the one who, for the first time, critically articulated the problematic of Ethiopian society. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to note that Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn's translation of 'Otherness' can also be rendered in various layers. While I consider that his persistent discourse on 'Otherness' instigated the space for a critical look of history, nation, and modernity, it is also essential to document key issues that have been maltreated in his discourse of modernity.

It is fair to note that Baykedagn also 'Otherised' others within the culture in an essentialist and derogatory discourse. For instance, he repeatedly referred to the Oromo

group as ‘even the gala’<sup>9</sup> who fear and disrespect the government is warranted to do so since the government lacks system, scheme and structure. He disregarded the diversity of people in their nature and in their traditions, and as beings in cultures they are both constructed and changing. While they may be ‘Others’ to Europe, they are also different from one another and from their own pasts, and should not be totalized or essentialized.

Although his incessant discussion of ‘Otherness’ fell short of analyzing the manifold experiences of ‘Otherness’ in his own country, I argue that his thought still functioned as an important and primary precursor to contemplation on important perspectives of modernity. A striking and perhaps most troublesome exchange of ‘Otherness’ in Baykedagn’s work is found in his intriguing exercise of exposing the cherished image of the nation as an ‘Other.’ Interestingly, the ‘Otherisation’ of the nation is not only discussed within the divide between Europe and Ethiopia, but also in the deconstruction of the myth of the nation that I have attempted to explore in Menelik II’s and Haile Selassie’s *ketet* and in the writings of *Berhanena Selam*. The nation that was reproduced and confirmed as a coherent and unproblematic unity was laid bare from its eternal presence.

When Baykedagn talked about *aemero yelelew hezb* (people without a thinking mind) *sereat yelelew hezb* (people who don’t have institutions) and *temehert yelelew hezb* (people who don’t have education) he provoked an argument against the definition of the national myth of the nation. His approach was based on comparative analysis to European values that believed in the fundamental elements of the modern nation

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<sup>9</sup> The Oromo is an ethnic group in Ethiopia. They are Cushitic speaking people. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, following the wars between the kingdom of Ethiopia and the neighboring Sultanate of Adal, which resulted in the exhaustion of both states, the Oromo moved north into their territories. They integrated with their Amharic speaking neighbors at least from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the power of the central government of Ethiopia had waned and local governors and kings enjoyed greater autonomy. During this era (which lasted until 1855) the Oromo dynasty of chiefs was the most important continuous line of warlords to dominate the figurehead emperors of Ethiopia. They became regents of the Empire. Ethiopian history is replete with the name ‘gala’ when referring to the Oromo, which is a derogatory word, some say meant slave. Oromos have always been dominated by the dominant group Amhara. Since the EPRDF took over, they have become vocal and active in fighting for their rights.

associated with the drawing up of a constitution and the provision of social welfare and economic reforms. By challenging the myth of the nation driven by nation-building elites at the centre, Baykedagn therefore surveyed the political, economic, and social background of citizenship, bringing forward a counter discourse of critical thinking to the narrative of the nation. The mainstreaming and metanarrative of certain types of memory, myth and values were for the first time critically scrutinized by Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn. Unfortunately, later modernists, such as the *Berhanena Selam* writers, did not take it to the next level. Thus, the centrality of power in the narrative of the nation played an important role in later years in the fashioning and refashioning of modern Ethiopian subjectivity.

What underlies the possibility of our talking about the ‘modern’ can never be understood without its early history. Early narratives are bridging texts that establish connections between present spaces of discourse and the past. Furthermore, present Ethiopian modernity discourses are a product of different discourses where present discourses have shaped the interpretation of past ones. I argue that a critical basis for the re-consideration of past and present is tantamount to re-evaluating the role of conflicting experiences of ‘the self’ and the nation in the present. I consider that the ideas of the *Berhanena Selam* intellectuals and of Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn root the source of discourse on Ethiopian modernity. It is critical to note that a contemporary understanding of Ethiopian modernity and modernism is widely derived from the space of modernity in Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia. It is also critical to note that it is the perspective that predicates itself on a significant examination of past and present discourses that comes up with the genesis and temporality of the meaning of modernity, in this space that is widely thought to have foregrounded the space of modernity and modernism. The connections and contrasts between earlier thoughts and the present suggest several ways in which the examination of discourse might be constituted.

Attending to the discursive and ontological processes of modernity therefore provides a way of analyzing Haile Selassie's space of modernity that can be better situated on a comparative historical plane, using the parallels between the present and the past.

### ***The Space of Modernity in Haile Selassie's Ethiopia***

While the political economy of modernity which Ethiopian scholars deliberate so much upon is inescapable, the cultural space opened up by this political economy is what I am most interested in as it foregrounds multiple imaginaries about what it means to be modern. Thus exists the necessity to, for instance, talk about the imaginary of the nation in the construction of the 'modern.' To this process, I have attempted to show the imagination of the nation in the *ketets* of Menelik and Haile Selassie, the processes of objectification in Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn's work, and the vernacularization of monarchy, nation, and modernity among the writers of *Berhanena Selam*.

It is particularly important to assess the imaginaries and sensibilities of modernity in Emperor Haile Selassie's time, not only because his modernist projects are widely discussed among Ethiopian intellectuals, but also because his reign significantly charted the course of Ethiopian modernism. It was in his reign that a new genre of literature, art, and music flourished. I begin by arguing that the project of modernity in the national space of Haile Selassie's Ethiopia was given much attention shortly after the Emperor's return from exile. It was then that Haile Selassie established the police force, an armed force, and abolished the land tribute system, replacing it with taxation in money. He put in place civil service machinations and placed heavy emphasis on building educational institutions. Such developments helped as a discursive strategy in the production and reproduction of the Emperor's image as a modernizing subject. Nevertheless, the modernization projects were too little and became gradually abstracted from the social contexts that the Emperor depended on for

his own significance and efficacy. Rhetoric needs a pragmatic return, and the Emperor's modernizing projects became increasingly imaginary and the country was hardly seen as changing. Consequently, his symbolic and institutional dimension was severely challenged in a mass uprising in 1974, which threw him out of power.

The establishment of an official discourse that could order society was a major concern for the Emperor after coming back from exile. Nestor Garcia Cancini (1995, p.41), in *Hybrid Cultures*, said that the "most reiterated hypothesis in the literature on Latin American modernism may be summarized as an exuberant modernism with a deficient modernization." Cancini (1995, p.43) further said:

Modernization with restricted expansion of the market, democratization for minorities, renewal with ideas but with low effectiveness in social processes...the disparities between modernism and modernization are useful to the dominant classes in preserving their hegemony, and at times in not having to worry about justifying it, in order simply to be dominant classes. In written culture, they achieved this by limiting schooling and the consumption of books and magazines; in visual culture, through three operations that made it possible for the elites, against every modernizing change, to reestablish over and over their aristocratic conception: a) spiritualize cultural production under the guise of artistic 'creation,' with the consequent division between art and crafts; (b) freeze the circulation of symbolic goods in collections, concentrating them in museums, palace and other exclusive centers; (c) propose as the only legitimate form of consumption of these goods that also spiritualized, hieratic method of reception that consists in contemplating them.

Indeed, in the years immediately following the Italo Ethiopian War, Haile Selassie was occupied with reworking, replaying, and restaging his power in productive ways, in what some scholars say was image building from the repercussion of the War. The image of the modernizing Emperor, *His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, elect of God, conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah*, with lineage close to Solomon and David, gave way to a symbolic market. Artists began to embellish paintings of his portraits, and his images often appeared in the church along

those of religious figures. Many say he fled into exile after the Italian occupation, while many of the nobility remained behind and fought the Italians gallantly, thus the image of the Emperor was severely damaged after his return from exile. Nevertheless, invoking the rhetoric of modernity, Haile Selassie exercised forms of domination and exclusion to re-authenticate his image and created an imaginary space that produced a deferred relationship to modernity.

The exuberant rhetoric of modernization was indeed useful in preserving the Emperor's hegemony and re-establishing his image. His modernist discourse after the war followed a Foucauldian notion of the discursive, which shaped and created meanings and subsequently managed to gain the status and currency of 'truth.' The idea of discourse centered on the way knowledge was used, rather than on determining truth or falsity. Foucault (1971, p.216) said that "the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose rule is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality."

The State's legitimacy rested on the defining features of the nation which presented itself as the historic extension of divine kings and queens, therefore making the Emperor the rightful protector of the nation. This brings us to the point on how the nation was imagined and performed in this official nationalism of the state. The nationalist rhetoric idealized images of the past through the veneration of exalted historical narratives of the nation—those of the great civilization of Axum and Lalibela and the divine monarchs who vanguarded the sophistication of these civilizations—and a utopist future. The center of the celebration was the indispensable dynamism of the Emperor.

This brings to mind Gebre Hiwot Baykedagn's critique of selectively focusing on particular historical periods and the Ethiopian monarchs' attempt to present a linear

and coherent narrative. Favoring rhetoric over grounded analysis, the State appealed to this type of national identity which paid tribute to the nation and its Emperor in an ideological pronouncement of rhetoric that undermined and limited the possibility of critical discussion about the State. The link between identity formation and political mobilization was also strengthened with a narrative of redemption from ‘Otherness.’ An evolving patriotic public fostered a space of official nationalist imagination where a national awakening from ‘Otherness’ was interpolated with strategies that perpetuated dynastic rule. The State therefore oriented and manipulated the nation’s imagination of nation and culture.

Whilst this nationalist imagination was injected into public memory, it is also central to ask exactly what and how successful Emperor Haile Selassie’s modernizing projects were? How have the projects of modernity presented themselves to the intellectual landmark and crisis of consciousness within the climate of Ethiopian culture, arts and philosophy? Could the image of the Emperor’s modernity that was fused with the nation’s glory have been given far greater power over our imagination than the real thing? Could it be argued that the Ethiopian experience is devoid of the legacy of a complex colonial African past, and, if so, how had the hegemony of the West worked with and against cultural identity? If the concept of modernity is understood as a description of a state of the technological sophistication, socio-political organization, and economic development to which cultures and societies were destined, I ask, how might we periodize, map, or narrate Haile Selassie’s modernity and modernism in such a context in Ethiopia?

Moreover, how did the Emperor foster his relationship to the West, the often contradictory situation that he positioned himself in the name of civilization, that of the reconstructionist rhetoric that claimed to integrate traditional culture with the demands of modernization? While these questions are vitally relevant to rethinking Ethiopian

modernity, my focus in this section is on one aspect, which is the area of education where these questions were routinely abstracted to instead offer a set of codes as the organizing principle of culture and society.

I focus on education because I believe that the foundational narrative of Ethiopian modernity and modernism took its primary root from the educational structure of Haile Selassie's Ethiopia. Education was the vehicle of official nationalism by which the grand narratives of modernity and modernism were substantiated. 'Otherness' was supposed to have been pre-empted by modern education. The irony was that the emphasis on European meta-narratives, meta-discourses, and meta-languages in the national education strategy, created various forms of 'Otherness' in fundamental dimensions of both the cultural and socio-political spheres. It is therefore crucial to critically look at education and its uncritical sweep of European modernist ideas as a site where the instrument of power controlled and legitimized the political and ideological constituencies of the modern era under education's hallmarks of progress. Moreover, what is interesting for my research are the individual consciousness and the psyche of the subject that was shaped by the educational ideology of this modern nation state. Artists and writers forged these social realities in their own images. At times, artists and writers, through individual memories and experiences, produced works in a way that the official nationalist narrative was contested. At others, European modernism's course of mastery that was broadcasted by the State manifested itself in master narratives and theories of the totality of the State which was paradigmatic of European universal reason and its universal subject. This is further elaborated in Chapter Three in the section on literary and visual modernists.

The Emperor applauded a tradition which constituted beliefs and values that revolved around the monarchy, as the creator, nurturer, and protector of the nation. At the same time, he reproduced the idea of the State as patron, promoter, and protector of

that tradition. The State's ideal of the 'modern' was nevertheless circumscribed within Western values and institutions, with perceptions of the West as superior, as it simultaneously engaged in a discursive formation of the grandeur of the nation. Hence, the nation was discursively formed as the 'Other' as it was simultaneously being deconstructed from being the 'Other.' The fact remained, nevertheless, that despite the Emperor's domestication oratory of the nation's grandeur and glory, the entrenchment of Eurocentric epistemology took root during his time.

This legacy of Eurocentric dominance continues to haunt present day educational institutions and subsequent scholarship and has been key to the epistemic excision of local and traditional scholars. Moreover, this educational ideology has laid the groundwork for important categories in the trajectory of Ethiopian modernity, such as the Ethiopian Student Movement and the revolution of 1974. It can be argued that where modernity rhetoric has played to rally the consent of the governed and enhance political power, it has also allowed and exacerbated an 'Otherness' through the epistemological trap of a Eurocentric definition of Ethiopianism that has marginalized the production of local scholarly knowledge.

### ***Scholarship, Education and the Rhetoric of Modernity***

One cannot therefore talk about the inception of modern education in Ethiopia without the critical engagement of its Western genealogy. The beginning of Ethiopian Studies itself the foundation of much of the local arts and cultural studies of the country started as an ambiguous European project. As Richard Pankhurst (2002) has said:

Ethiopian Studies, in a more modern sense, started, outside the country, most notably with the work of the illustrious German scholar Hiob Ludolf. He was succeeded by long line of European scholars, among them the Scottish "explorer" James Bruce, the German scientist Edouard Rüppell, the French brother-travelers Antoine and Arnauld d'Abbadie, and, in due course, by such savants as the Germans August Dillmann

and Enno Littmann, the Italians Ignazio Guidi and Carlo Conti Rossini, and many others. Reference to these names, however, should not obscure the fact that behind them was a no less remarkable line of Ethiopian savants, who served as their informants, and without whom Ethiopian studies would have been infinitely the poorer. Among the first of such informants was Ludolf's colleague Abba Gorgoreyos, and the venerable early nineteenth century Liq Atsqu of Gondar, who generously assisted so many visiting scholars from abroad.

The tradition of Ethiopian Studies was re-affirmed during the Emperor's time, and, as Professor Pankhurst (2002) has said, "constituted a chapter in the history of Ethiopia's post-war scholarly development." Ethiopian Studies continued to be dominated by European scholars after the war. The Emperor, for example, awarded the first Ethiopian Studies prize on October 10, 1964 to French scholar, Professor Marcel Cohn. Europeans therefore emphatically overshadowed local scholars who were mainly used as 'native' informants, and who were rarely part of the scholarly publications of Ethiopian Studies.

Although serious scholarship that looks into the conjunctures of Haile Selassie's space of modernity and modernism has yet to be produced, Ethiopian academics like Messay Kebede have written about the serious shortcomings of Haile Selassie's modernizing projects. They have gone as far as saying that it was the Emperor's Eurocentric educational policy that had debilitated the production of serious scholarship and that had contributed to the rise of the student movement, to the Emperor's own demise, and to the eventual uprising of the 1974 revolution. Messay Kebede (2006) has claimed that "besides the cultural drawbacks of colonization and neocolonialism, the fact that Ethiopians became psychologically decentralized, as in any colonized country, even though they were not submitted to colonization, confirms the universally uprooting impact of Western education."

The Emperor stressed the importance of modern education in many of his public appearances. For instance, in a speech to the division heads of the provinces educational institutions, he said:

Ethiopia is making great strides in her effort to reach the stages of modernity that the West has achieved. In order for this project to succeed, she needs the relentless support of educational institutions and teachers like you which are key mechanism towards the success of modernity. You as leaders of this endeavor should feel very much responsible to give the best you can to the improvement and dissemination of education and the glory of Ethiopia. (Haile Selassie as cited in *Fere Kenafir*, 1963, p.311)

The response always glorified the Emperor in the following way: “Your Majesty have contributed and sacrificed so much for the education of your children. Your Majesty is tirelessly working to bring us close to civilization and the modern world and the modern world is realizing all your efforts. Your kindness and your benevolence is known by God.” (Selassie as cited in *Fere Kenafir*, 1963, p.351)

The early rhetoric of education, that of the immediate years after the war, characteristically alternated between idealistic and pragmatic discourse, which emphasized the efficacy and practicality of modernization which accrued rhetorical and political advantages for the Emperor. The opening of schools was practical, advantageous, and critical to image building right after his return from exile in 1941. The first thing the Emperor did right after coming back was open up two of the prominent secondary schools, General Wingate and Taffari Mekonnen, with key positions staffed by foreign personnel. A higher institution of learning, the University College of Addis Ababa, later to be named Haile Selassie I University and currently called Addis Ababa University, was opened in 1950, again staffed by foreign personnel.

The later rhetoric, which was after the solidification of power, defined the Emperor as being chosen by God and encouraged the governed to act in accordance

with this transcendent principle. For instance, a response to one of the Emperor's speeches by the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time was: "Your Majesty is given duty entrusted by God to expand education...with your benevolent leadership and genuine struggle for your country, Ethiopia is standing side by side with the civilized countries of the world and your Majesty has managed to introduce the culture of your country and people to the rest of the world." (*Fere Kenafir*, 1963, p.416) Ethiopia was no longer an 'Other' and was standing 'side by side' with Europe' because of the Emperor's struggle to pursue modern education. 'Otherness' held an intrinsic fragility as it was blended with a sense of exceptionalism in a narrative that comprised the nation and its grandeur. I have attempted to elucidate this brand of 'Otherness' through the writings of *Berhanena Selam*.

As stated earlier, *Berhanena Selam* was established when the Emperor was the Crown Prince. The paper inaugurated its ideas of modernity within the narrative of the sumptuousness of the nation and its monarch, and continued this narrative throughout its tenure. What constituted the historical, cultural, and political truth that established social and political public life was therefore framed by early intellectuals in imaginative geographies of the nation and its Emperor. This discourse was deeply felt by many of the intellectuals of the time. Of course, as I stated in the introductory chapter, there were many who were disillusioned as well after the Emperor's return from exile. It was this group of intellectuals who nurtured the rise of the Ethiopian Student Movement and who opened up another chapter in the discourse of Ethiopian modernity. The contestation to this discourse and the reconsideration of modern heritage therefore came later in the Ethiopian Student Movement which I cover in Chapter Three on literary modernists.

Pedagogy would also take on the task of regenerating a renewed sense of both social and political agency. Several variants of nationalist pedagogy developed in

discursive frames which legitimized the Emperor's position of power, thus creating an official nationalist imagination within his own domain of sovereignty. The expansion of print media after the war facilitated the official nationalist narrative that was previously limited to proclamations like Menelik's and Haile Selassie's *ketet*' Newspapers as well as textbooks and notebooks began their pages with the Emperor's portraits showing his 'grace' and 'magnanimity,' and at times his 'divinity.' These images served towards legitimating and preserving his hegemony and metaphorically represented over and over again his vanguard evocation of national history. "What is interesting," said Partha Chatterjee (2003, p.281), "is the special way in which a particular national culture turns image into an icon, to be reproduced, distributed, displayed, and sacralized."

Although art historians would like to have a clear taxonomy for the structure of the photograph as being indexical, the photographic medium can also be socially constructed as an iconic signifier that is beyond mere visual merit. Haile Selassie's recurring portrait incarnations conveyed some logocentric claim that suggested a metaphysical dimension and logic of fetishism. In elucidating the historical construction of the divine nature of early Indian rulers, Chatterjee (1994, p.84) said:

Where kings acquire kingdoms and hold power by divine grace, the business of arriving at a verdict on the character of rulers has to be negotiated between kings and gods. The only role that the ordinary subject has in all this is in bearing the consequences of the actions of these superior entities. Of course, the subject knows between a good king and a bad one and does not implicate himself in the business of ruling: he never puts himself in the place of the ruler. In recalling the history of kingdoms, he does not look for a history, for himself, the thought would never have occurred to him because it is not a national history because its protagonists are gods and kings not peoples. The bonds of nation-ess have not yet been imagined that would justify the identification of the historian with the consciousness of a solidarity that is supposed to act itself out in history.

What is Ethiopian was therefore not always a question of a mimetic adoption of imported models, but rather of synthesizing an exquisite past of a rolling civilization, such as in what Chatterjee (1994, p.97) humorously has said about present India: “Ancient glory, present misery: the subject of this entire story is us. The mighty heroes of ancient India were our ancestors and the feeble inhabitants of India today are ‘ourselves.’” Modernity was hence a ‘nativism’ that constituted the inspiration and the search for roots which was always inclusive of loyalty to the Emperor, the flag, and the Empire. Haile Selassie’s translation of Ethiopian modernity was therefore radical ‘nativism’ that had gone incongruously imperial, and artists and writers were encouraged to produce works that manifested national consciousness with complete acknowledgement of his hegemonic sovereignty.

I have in the introductory chapter established the critical junctures of Ethiopian modernity. The first juncture was the shock of the Italian invasion, which contributed to the rise of a group of a few intellectuals who questioned the official nationalist narrative of Haile Selassie's regime. It was these intellectuals who were overpowered by Haile Selassie’s image building discourse of modernity, but who also played an important role in initiating the preamble for a later discourse of modernity. The second stage of modernity I have argued to be was the movement of decolonization, which gave rise to an educated elite who were influenced by the cultural discourses of the anti-colonial resistance that had engulfed the African continent. It was these group of intellectuals who were the greatest beneficiaries of Haile Selassie’s Eurocentric educational edifice. It was this same group of intellectuals who also became adversaries to the State. The impact of this Eurocentric mode of education on these intellectuals and their contestatory actions is analyzed in Chapter Three when I look into the visual and literary modernists of the time. These groups of intellectuals played an important role in

the rise of the Ethiopian Student Movement and the eventual uprising of the revolution of 1974.

Although I discuss three visual artists and three literary modernists in Chapter Three to give light to the intellectual movements that were direct manifestations of Haile Selassie's education policy, I believe that looking at the trajectory of the Fine Art School is also crucial, as the main interest in this study is Ethiopian modernism. Moreover, the visual modernists that I discuss in Chapter Three were also entangled with the Fine Art School, which makes it all the more important to have a historical overview of the school. The establishment of the Fine Art School opened a space where identity was simultaneously contested and deployed while it was reproduced under the hegemonic construction of European modernism. Despite a curriculum modeled under European archetype, the Fine Art School, from 1957 until the revolution in 1974, was an institution that struggled between a pluralized and a universalized version of modernism. While artists like Skunder Boghossian played a crucial role in the multiple imperatives of modernism, there were many who were oblivious to the existence of the multiple discourses of modernity and modernism. If Boghossian explored the plurality of modernism and the contestations within modernism, equally troubling was a group of artists engaged in the uncritical aestheticization of the universal disciplinary coercions of modernism. What is crucial to my argument, however, is that both brands of artists complicated the Emperor's dominant discourse.

While one account like Boghossian expressed the significance of colonial discourse in the production of African aesthetics, the other conveyed its unproblematized Eurocentric orientation. Nevertheless, both interrogated the Emperor's notion of nation, monarchy, and identity. It is because of these contestations that presented themselves in conflicting narratives that I argue that the school school was an exception from other educational institutions in the country. Although the establishment

of the school was aimed at serving the Emperor's modernist enterprise and his way of a select adoption of certain concepts of European modernity, the anxiety of professional indebtedness by artists who came from abroad complicated the Emperor's discursive space of singular modernity that revolved around the nation and its monarch.

### ***The Fine Art School***

The Fine Art School was established in August, 1957 within the discussed spectrum of the Emperor's modernity when the promotion of modern culture of what Cancini (1995, p.41) has called "a symbolic yield in art" became important for the Emperor in order to be perceived as cultured in the modern world. The school hence arrived within the Emperor's paternalistic regimen of modernity where art and literature were considered to have important repertoires of contents. While the Emperor upheld the national culture of traditional Ethiopian art and sought to preserve it in the face of foreign influences, he also entrusted the fantasies of progress and innovation in modern art. In his speech at the inaugural of the school, on August 17, 1957, the Emperor said: "We supported the establishment of this school because we think that modern artists would combine traditional methods and send their creative works to the modern platforms of the West, letting the world know that Ethiopians are also part of the modern world." (Selassie as cited in *Fere Kenafir*, 1963, p.416)

The school's main progenitor and mastermind was Ale Felege Selam Hiruy, who had studied painting at the University of Chicago. Although the Emperor's symbolic support towards the opening of the school represented him as a true patron of arts and culture, it was Ale Felege Selam's struggle, more than any state sponsored program, which eventually gave rise to the opening of the Art School. With a donation of Ethiopian \$100,000 from the Ministry of Education and an additional Ethiopian \$50,000 gained through Ale Felege Selam's own fundraising efforts, the school was

built at the back of Menelik School and was inaugurated by the Emperor on the Emperor's birthday in August, 1957.

It is important to note that prior to the opening of the school, artists like Ale Felege Selam Hiruy had been sent abroad to study art. Among them were Afe Worq Gebre Yesus who studied in Italy and later became a prolific writer well known for his masterpiece novel '*Tobia*,' Agegnehu Engeda and Zerihun Dominick who studied painting in France, and Abebe Wolde-Giorgis who studied sculpture in France. The most promising of the three, Agegnehu Engeda, was an exceptional painter who studied at the Academie Juliana and Ecole Nationale Superieure in Paris. Agegnehu is especially known for his paintings of Fascist barbarism and his murals in the church of Debre Berhan Selassie. He also taught painting, providing supplies to students from his own meager financial income. Besides these three, artists Skunder Boghossian studied in France, Afework Tekle in the United Kingdom, and Gebre Kristos Desta in Germany, they would all later come back to leave an impact on the Ethiopian creative scene.

Like many of the educational institutions in the country, the Fine Art School opened up with only sixty students, a deficient curriculum, inadequate intellectual resources, a shortage of teachers, and a pattern of education that initially did not yield much for critical discourse regarding its utility. Besides Ale Felegeselam Hiruy, who started the art school with much hard work, enthusiasm, and optimism, the school was initially staffed with European personnel. Some lacked proper training and used marginal Western discourses to reflect on artistic theory and practice. Some were trained artists while others were just there by chance. For instance, Herbert Seiler, who studied sculpture in Austria and who came to Ethiopia in a motorcycle adventure that took him first to Egypt, taught sculpture in the school. Seiler was later known for his bronze portraiture works of the Emperor.

Many say he copied the bronze and copper works of Tadesse Gizaw who was trained as an industrial designer in the United States of America. While Tadesse Gizaw's work was known for its stellar and superior design, Seiler was the sculptor extraordinaire who was commissioned several times by the Emperor to do work for the palace, as well as for many governmental institutions. The representation of Europeans as the sole originators of ideas and as what we might call the 'knowing subjects' prevailed despite the Emperor's rhetoric of an Ethiopian modernity that should extract the best of indigenous Ethiopian thought and practice.

It was not until the return of artists from abroad, those who had left to study abroad after 1957, that the Fine Art School started to formulate ways in which artists could articulate their sense of self in a wider social and political context, not through just the artworks themselves, but through the construction of a cultural discourse around art and art history. Afework Tekle, who is considered to be one of the early modern Ethiopian artists after Agegnehu Engeda, came back after being trained at the Slade School in London. Although Afework Tekle never taught at the Fine Art School, his presence in the country around the time of the opening of the school left a significant influence.

He opened the first art exhibition in the country in 1953 in the City Hall, which was opened by the Emperor himself. The school also sent young students abroad soon after the school's opening. Tadesse Belayneh, who later became director of the Art School, Tadesse Mamecha, Alemayehu Bongor and Worku Mamo were sent to the USSR, while Girma Kidane was sent to Prague, then Czechoslovakia. The return of calligraphist Yegezu Bisrat in 1959 from West Germany, Gebre Kristos Desta in 1961, Abdurahman Sheriff in 1968 from West Germany and Skunder Boghossian in 1965 from France and the United States significantly altered the production of art in the school.

While the production of art significantly changed from its traditional repertoire, the problem was that artists came back from abroad with their visual voice less distinct than one would wish it to be. Art production was not structured by, or refracted through the geographic variety and the cultural diversities that had contributed to the aesthetics of modernism. The particularities of Ethiopian modernism failed to be articulated in the works of artists who had come from abroad. With the aesthetic codification of European modernism intact, what was interesting in the works of these artists was nevertheless the deconstruction of the idea of the nation and the monarch that had preoccupied the regime.

These artists, just as the regime, were enamored by European modernity and modernism. Nevertheless, their fascination represented the freshly invented but unproblematized languages of modernity and modernism that they had just gotten acquainted with abroad. They signaled reference to the ‘modern’ as one who was sophisticated and restless, destined to have a great impact on tackling backward thoughts. Notwithstanding these facts, these artists assumed the total consciousness and originality of an Ethiopian culture in the making of modernity because they significantly altered the artistic ambience of Ethiopian modernism. If one looked at the works of Afeework Tekle, Abdurahman Sheriff, and Gebre Kristos Desta produced then, one saw a form of aesthetics in an authoritarian voice of European high modernism that did not explore the interplay of domination or resistance, but nevertheless opposed narratives of the State. In often technically flawless European modernist aesthetics, these artists produced works that were devoid of the narrative of monarchy and nation, which they thought was backward and wary. From this perspective, they established their weight on the official narrative of the regime. This will be further elaborated in Chapter Three, particularly in the works of Gebre Kristos Desta who played a major role in the production of modernist aesthetics. It is from this viewpoint that I argue the

prominence of the Art School and its independent space had unlike any other school in the country at that time.

On the other hand, the influence of Skunder Boghossian, who taught at the Art School from 1966-69, was unique in its artistic vocabulary and particularly shaped the understanding of modern art in Ethiopia. Boghossian is extensively discussed in Chapter Two. The 1960s was also a time when the movement of decolonization charged with a radical popular consciousness set the ground for a great many innovations in theater, literature, and art throughout the continent. Ethiopia during the 1950s and 1960s was also politically significant for African activism and had attained great notoriety as a distinct hallmark of Pan-Africanism. The spirit of the 60s in Ethiopia, when Skunder Boghossian taught at the Fine Art School, was also very much about renewal. Debate had raged in intellectual life over cultural problems, although discourse in aesthetics and art was still marginalized. The Emperor nevertheless valorized the works of the artists who came from abroad as they were deconstructing his narrative of monarchy and nation, since he had built an image as an outspoken decolonizing leader whose capital Addis Ababa resides to be the hub. For instance, Afework Tekle, Gebre Kristos Desta, and Skunder Boghossian all received the outstanding achievement prizes for modern art from the prestigious Haile Selassie I Foundation despite their contestatory articulations of the Emperor's ethos.

Out of all the artists who came from abroad, it is considered that Gebre Kristos Desta and Skunder Boghossian were the major artists to have defined Ethiopian modern art. It is crucial to note here that although I argue in Chapter Three that Gebre Kristos Desta fell short of articulating a modernism beyond the West, he was still an artist who was radically different from the compartmental modernity that the State had prescribed. Both Skunder Boghossian and Gebre Kristos Desta were modern, but their modernities differed. Boghossian's works created meanings and values without essentializing

notions of cultural identity. Gebre Kristos Desta on the other hand, accounted for only certain dimensions of modernity. He was nevertheless the most vocal in demystifying the features of the nationalist narrative of flag, nation, and Empire as he frequently talked about tradition as being backward and irrational, he strived for a completely rational, hence modern society.

The Emperor nevertheless supported the works of Gebre Kristos Desta and Skunder Boghossian who challenged his regime in differing articulations. This was an understanding of the power-knowledge relation that renders the Foucauldian notion of a changing relations to truth and of how knowledge is implicated in practices of power, constituting truths as well as affecting and effecting self-understandings and moreover, interrogating the general history of truth. Even in trajectories of contention, a different discursive formation of power that was not only negative, but also productive had emerged. The Emperor used his power to create an image of being ‘modern’ as one who supported the arts even though the arts criticized his stance. In this case, power played to be ambiguous, simultaneously making him the victim as well as the oppressor.

Haile Selassie’s politicized historical memory was nevertheless demolished with the horrendous famine in 1973 and the immense poverty that had confronted the population. Consequently, his symbolic and institutional dimension was severely challenged in a mass uprising in 1974, which threw him out of power. Ethiopia entered a period of profound political, economic, and social change and a period of socialist experimentation. The next seventeen years witnessed a revolution imbued with narrow empiricism.

The creative arts movement in the Fine Art School that was simultaneously being subjugated and reproduced in the latter part of the Emperor’s reign was literally extinguished. Seventeen years of socialist leadership took a toll in the production of the

creative arts. Today, the Fine Art School, which had been amalgamated into Addis Ababa University, is battling with a curriculum that is dated and with a scholarship that lacks critical examination of the social context of Ethiopian contemporary art that should look into the relationship between art and representation. The school is producing many artists, but the lack of art historians, critics, and critical scholarship leaves it intellectually bankrupt.

As much as many Ethiopian intellectuals want to retrospectively embrace Haile Selassie's modernization movements, I have argued that the Emperor's ideological appropriation of modernity did not come without a predominantly Eurocentric connotation, but within its and his authoritarian and hegemonic politics. The introduction of certain modernizing projects was elevated to epic proportions and hailed as a visible proof that Ethiopia was working to become a modern state. It is nevertheless impossible to talk about the paradox and ambiguity of Emperor Haile Selassie's modernization processes while neglecting critical perspectives on key concepts of modernity, such as education, that I believe impacted the constitution of the 'modern' self.

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## Chapter 2

### Modernist Spirits: The Images of Skunder Boghossian

*I am aware that I am a witness to my time, other times. I am just time itself.*  
(Boghossian as cited in T. Benjamin, 1981)

Much has been written about Skunder Boghossian, and aside from the writings of his friend and colleague, poet/writer Solomon Deressa, and art historian Salah Hassan, a critical definition upon which to conceptualize his work has been limited to popular perception and recurring anecdotes. Often his works are defined as ‘dream like.’ His influences are rooted to Paul Klee, the Bauhaus expressionist and to Wilfredo Lam, the Afro Cuban artist. His love for music is attributed to jazz and his elaborate work is basically boxed up as African ‘motifs’ and ‘symbols.’ Notwithstanding these facts, the art of Skunder Boghossian has left a quintessential mark on Ethiopian modernism. His vigorous imagery presents an absorbing and critical account of the political culture of the colonial and post colonial eras, challenging the discourse of European modernist expressions to define modern Ethiopian art against canonical interpretations. Inspired by decolonization’s landscape of optimism, Boghossian confronted the challenge of rethinking alternative ways of formal and conceptual frameworks that outlined the intellectual, political, and artistic philosophies of what Mudimbe (1994, p.2) has called “the multi faceted idea of Africa.” His visual contribution, which was insistent on hybridization, was stylistic and conceptually complex, and played a significant role in the critical recovery of Pan-Africanism, Ethiopian nationalism and crises of consciousness, makes Skunder Boghossian a vital figure in the dialogue of Ethiopian modernism.

Skunder Boghossian was born in 1937 during Mussolini’s occupation of Ethiopia to a father of Armenian descent and an Ethiopian mother. His father, Colonel

Kosrof Gorgorios Boghossian, was an officer of the Imperial Body Guard during the reign of Haile Selassie and was active in the resistance against Italian occupation. Colonel Kosrof was taken to Italy as prisoner of war when Boghossian was just one year old and did not return to Ethiopia until Boghossian's tender age of eight. Boghossian was a student at Taffari Mekonnen School<sup>10</sup> when he was introduced to Jacques Godbout, a French Canadian writer and painter who was teaching French at the University College before joining the National Film Board of Canada as producer and scriptwriter in 1958. Godbout gave Boghossian lessons in painting, and in Boghossian's words Godbout "taught him to let the painting paint himself." (Boghossian as cited in Deressa 1997, p.10) According to friend and writer Solomon Deressa (1997), "Colonel Kosrof Boghossian would not have picked painting as the first career choice for his son and was not aware that Skunder was cutting classes to take painting lessons from Jacques Godbout. He wanted his son to do well in school and on his way to a respectable future, if not in the military, at least in the civil service."

Nevertheless, Godbout's training in painting had been the extent of Boghossian's art training when in 1955, at the age of seventeen, Boghossian won second prize in abstract art at the National Art Exhibition held for the Jubilee Anniversary Celebration of Emperor Haile Selassie. Afework Tekle and Gebre Kristos Desta, older artist than he, received the first and third prizes respectively. Following his success at the National Art Exhibition, Boghossian was awarded a scholarship to study abroad. He studied at the St. Martin's School of Art and Central School in London, and the Academie de la Grand Chaumiere and the Ecole Superieure des Beaux Arts in Paris. His experiences in Paris were what crystallized the conviction of his creative style. Paris

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<sup>10</sup> Taffari Mekonnen School was one of the earliest boys school established by Emperor Haile Selassie and run by the British.

brought a long, deep retreat inward and backward, backward to the histories and myths of people of color and inward into the spirit of fulfillment and new courage.

### ***The Paris Years***

*I grew up in the streets of Paris, I had no problem being black or yellow or green. I learned my craft.* (Boghossian as cited in Deressa, 1997)

Much has been written about African diaspora artists who lived in Paris in the 1940s and 1950s and their significance in shaping the evolution of modern African art history. It was these artists who appropriated the Parisienne avant-garde's modernist techniques and mediated their own coherent meaningful images by progressively contesting the political, cultural, and intellectual praxis of the Western art market and the academy that framed and often hindered the historical constructs of African modernism. Much has also been written about the binding liaison between African and European modernity that generated its own social articulation of African modernism and sought conduits that changed direction away from European modernism while yet being intertwined with it. Exhibitions like the *Short Century; Liberation and Independence*<sup>11</sup> depicted an anthology of historical texts and images that referred to critical practices championed by African artists confronting or responding to Africa's modernity during the colonial and immediate post independence eras. African modernism came into being in a world framed by colonialism where visions for modernism often overlapped with universal ambition and local variations.

With symbols and signs, these artists illustrated the fluidity of cultures, and particularly the mutability of blackness and its aphorisms. One could say that by

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<sup>11</sup> This was an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art held in February, 2002 and curated by Okwui Enwezor. It encompassed the many faces of African Modernism and documented the history of Africa since its partition in 1884/85 during the Berlin conference. It centered on the short century of liberation from colonialism from 1945 to the abolition of apartheid in 1994.

appropriating and juxtaposing their own symbolic figures, artists narrated the complexities of their societies and skillfully negotiated W.E.B. Dubois' 'double consciousness' to assert that Africans were no longer relegated to looking at themselves through the eyes of others, but rather through their own gaze.

Boghossian was part of this group who lived in Paris at that critical time and who played an important role in redefining colonized subjectivity. Like many of the African diaspora artists of the time, he challenged essentialized concepts of identity within a strategic and positional structure of representation. What made these local interventions into the colonial space powerfully poignant and modern was their construction of a field in which a dialectical discourse on power relations was played out. The experiences of Boghossian's black diasporic identity can hence emphatically be translated in the discursive formation of what Brent Edwards (2003, p.4) has called "black internationalism that makes possible an analysis of the institutional formations of black internationalism."

Of his experiences in Paris, Boghossian (as cited in Deressa, 1997, p.12) said:

In passing I just happened to look in a small gallery. I saw drawings in the window that actually gave me a bodily shock. So impressed by the dramatic play of forces and the supernatural quality of the work, I really couldn't move. I don't know how long I stood there. That was Lam. When I finally went inside I was startled again by Matta. In his paintings there was a cosmic coordination in space and time and his metallic rhythm vibrated in such a way that the canvases seemed to move. The effect of all this was confusing about my work, but eventually that confusion became a suggestion.

Indeed, the confusion became a suggestion when in Paris Boghossian got immersed in African mythology. His images explored the context and use of African symbolism and iconography through traditional African spiritual practices that did not distinguish between material and spiritual existence. Art critic Solomon Deressa (1965) called these images "the ingenious infusion of spirit into ostensibly prosaic objects."

Poised between the living, the dead, and the unborn, Boghossian got immersed in the infinite realities of the universe where the visible world was simply an isolated case in relation to the universe. What made Boghossian's Paris works unique and important was also his close association with the icons of independence and liberation, Aime Cesaire and Cheikh Anta Diop. For friend and art critic Kifle Biseat, who lived in Paris with Boghossian in the early 1960s and who was also closely acquainted with these two giants, "it was these two great personalities who deconstructed European historicism of African history and culture and who distinctly shaped Skunder's creativity by inculcating in him the role that African people have played in history and their impact on the development of early societies and institutions." (Biseat, personal communication, February, 26, 2009)

Dr. Diop's work *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* approached the history of Africa by locating Egypt on the map of human geography that attested its civilization as African in origin. Diop associated the Egyptians of the ancient world to Ethiopians who claimed that the Egyptians were one of their colonies which was brought into Egypt by the deity Osiris. Diop referred to the Greek writer Herodotus who repeatedly referred to the Egyptians as being dark-skinned people with woolly hair. Herodotus said that Ethiopians had the same tint of skin which approached the Egyptians. Kifle Biseat (personal communication, February, 26, 2009) also said that Anta Diop resembled Mengistu Neway. Neway was the commander of the Ethiopian Imperial Bodyguard during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie. He organized the 1960 failed coup attempt against the Emperor. Biseat thinks Neway left an essential mark on Boghossian. According to Biseat, it was Diop's combination of an unusual breath of knowledge and his rebellious stance that had engulfed black diaspora artists of the time and. He thinks that in Boghossian's case, it was personified through the defiant image of Mengistu Neway, and Diop's optimism that gave the young generation of

Boghossian's age a redemptive faith in its roots that presented, if nothing else, a poetic image of African greatness that was a phenomenal influence on Boghossian's artistic career.

Biseat has also said that the same can be said of Aime Césaire, who in 1961 presented his poem *Ethiopie a Alioune Diop* at the *Congrès des Artistes et Ecrivains Noirs*,<sup>12</sup> which has been organized by Alioune Diop and Aimé Césaire. In more than just a quest for a critical imagination of Africa's modernity, Césaire insisted on African intellectual tradition as the outcome of a conscious examination and questioning of the concept of a center, not by moving it as Ngugi-wa Thiongo has suggested, but by superseding it in discursive terms. A counter discourse that placed unifying narratives in the production of cultures of affirmation and resistance was necessary to decimate a whole discursive and referential system of the West's fictive notion of Africanity. It was within this context of an all-embracing Africanity that aspired towards the construction of a new and credible one that Césaire reclaimed Ethiopia in a genealogy that bore witness to historical vitalities, rendering Ethiopia as both discourse and knowledge. The following is a partial excerpt of Césaire's poem:

Ethiopie	Ethiopia
Belle comme ton ecriture, etrange	beautiful like your strange writing
Qui avance dans le mystere telle un arbre	advancing into the mystery like a tree
D'epiphytes charge	loaded with epiphytes
Parmi l'ardoise du ciel	amidst the slate of the sky
Ni prince ni bouche du prince	neither a prince nor his spokesman
Je me presente	I present myself
Moi quinze depouilles virile	I fifteen virile corpses
Trois elephants	three elephants
Dix lions	ten lions

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<sup>12</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> International Conference of Black Writers and Artists was organized in Paris in 1956 and is remembered for its historic speeches and thought provoking statements. The congress reflected the African intellectual environment of the post World War II era particularly on the creativity of black writers and artists.

This historic conference, which included delegates like Frantz Fanon, Léopold Senghor, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ben Enwonwu, and Cheikh Anta Diop, revalorized African identity and culture affirming an overwhelming pride in black heritage. For African diaspora intellectuals, poets, and artists of the time, the specificity and unity of black existence as a historically developing phenomenon that arose through the highly contingent events of colonialism and the African slave trade was the core or essence of the black experience. For instance, in his 1939 poem *Negritude* in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to My Native Land), Césaire referred to a collective identity of the African diaspora as, being born of a common historico-cultural experience of subjugation. The process of decolonization extended Césaire's original intervention in *Negritude* into various forms of African diaspora cultural expressions.

For Boghossian and friends like Kifle Biseat whose experience with decolonization was much different from their African counterparts, this black collective agency of cultural expression and its characterization of Ethiopia as the image of black pride offered, according to Biseat (personal communication, February 26, 2009), “an incredible high esteem of our country that we did not have and at the same time made us aware that we were black although we were never part of the social dynamics of an African society that was created through the institution of colonialism and slavery.” For these young intellectuals, the valorization of this black aesthetic and intellectual production hence positioned itself in a vehement condemnation of French colonialism and racism. It marked a fundamental step in the assertion of black identity that came with a feeling of responsibility expected from “the descendants of the greatest and proudest race who symbolized the value and dignity of African traditions.” (ibid). Biseat has said that through Césaire and Diop's acquaintance they were made to believe that the core of the black man's problem was cultural rootlessness and that colonialism

and slavery had confronted the black subject as an object. Hence, a movement of self consciousness that reassessed the African past and that challenged the objectivity of black existence was necessary. For these young Ethiopians in the diaspora, the project of black liberation hence came in all its fullness, at once spiritual and political.

It was during this historic development in the formulation of African diasporic identity and culture that Skunder Boghossian's most important *Nourishers*<sup>13</sup> (see Figure 2.1 and 2.2) series works found its roots.

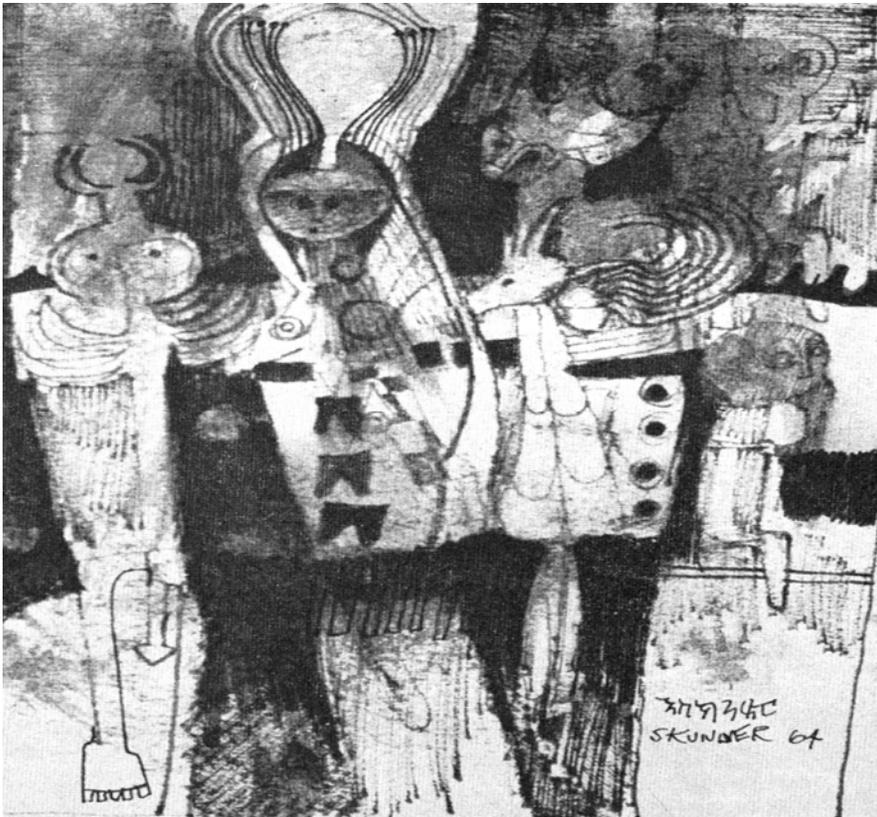


Figure 2.1 Skunder (Alexander Boghossian) *the Nourishers Series: Sketch*, 1963, charcoal on cardboard, dimension unknown, retrieved from: Deressa, S. (1965, January-February). Skunder: In Retrospect Precociously. *Ethiopian Observer*

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<sup>13</sup> While the entire *Nourishers* series is not available in pictures, I will show what can be found from different documentations. See Appendix for description.



Figure 2.2 Skunder (Alexander) Boghossian, the *Nourishers Series: the Grass Spirit*, 1963, charcoal on cardboard, dimension unknown, retrieved from: Deressa, S. (1965, January-February). Skunder: In Retrospect Precociously. *Ethiopian Observer*.

In a Benjaminian fascination with the subliminal, Boghossian found a way of using the sub-conscious as a genealogy that tried to study how it could penetrate existing society. The notion of a dream from which the age has to be awakened served Walter Benjamin as a metaphor for the revolutionary function of art in the post-Baudelairean urban landscape of Europe. He said: “The reformation of consciousness lies solely in the awakening of the world from its dream about itself.” (Benjamin, W. 1983, p.43) Benjamin applied this image to “dialectical thinking as the organ of historical awakening,” (ibid) its truth through which past and present are constructed. Enchanted with the material culture of capitalism, Benjamin’s project of awakening involved the

“unconscious outer world of remembrance” (ibid) in the form of dream experience where the past emerges in a distorted historical recollection. The recognition of the image is the awakening from the dream which brings out its truth through which past and present are constructed. The many symbolical correspondences in the *Nourishers* series, of forms and shapes and of inanimate and animate objects, were conceptually linked to a cosmology in which the universe was spiritually interfused and where this spirituality was a fusion between the past and the present, the secular and the sacred, and between logic and intuition.

What is interesting about Benjamin’s thinking in relation to Boghossian’s *Nourishers* series is the mediation between subject and object that becomes the source of history where the unconscious memory emerges in new meanings. Boghossian’s *Nourishers* series was aware of the materiality of the past, but was also wary of the epistemology and ethics of its recuperation. To this process, this series was embellished in allegorical images that, as a dialectical mode, responded to the destabilization of the historically specific situation from which they emerged. Moreover, the series presented the wishes and desires of the African collective unconscious, that was mediated by images of the past and that included the desires of past generations displayed in dreamlike fetishes in which the traces of history have survived.

According to Benjamin (1983) the image so revealed is not necessarily a representation of reality, but a pennant for evaluating the significance of historical reality. Recognizing the image of the past depends on a certain temporality in which the meaning of the past is realized in the present. This image is dialectical and the never fulfilled destiny of the fragments. Benjamin has referred to these images as montages of tension, its forces signified by the claims of history, truth, material and meaning. Montage is the organizing principle of these fetishized images in an otherwise allegorically framed world of things. “History decays into images, not stories-the first

stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history.” (Benjamin, W. 2002, p.461) For Benjamin, this image of socio-historical reality might therefore be redeemed by the “profane illumination” (ibid) of the artist.

Beyond depicting the sense of self and life as dialectical and open to the interplay of what was ‘Other’ and unknown, these shifting images of the *Nourishers* series from the tangible world to its spiritual and supernatural parallel also seemed to express not only the social and the spiritual, but also the physical and the metaphysical, as the construction and maintenance of African aesthetic ideology. Fragmented and simultaneously connected to the conceptualization of Boghossian’s own experiences, these dialectical images depict a Benjaminian notion of history that is juxtaposed in ways which do not necessarily relate to each other, but are yet connected in a dialectical tension. I am bringing Benjamin into this discussion not necessarily to make a parallel between these two individuals, but to acknowledge the striking similarities between their two modes of thinking. Perhaps one can associate them both with the free play of associations that was characteristic of the Surrealist Movement and of this movement that they both were referred to. Nevertheless, the Surrealists’ preoccupation with the subliminal was not both means and ends for these two thinkers. In a letter written to Scholem in 1924, Benjamin talked of a “‘politics’ from within myself” (Schloem and Adorno, 1994, p.274) and it is this politicized subliminal uncovering of socio historical reality that prompted me to draw a parallel. Both were not solely interested in the Surrealists’ fixation of objects created or discovered by the unconscious, but of the objects’ political potential. I believe that Boghossian’s *Nourishers* series attempted to discover both the unconscious of the dreaming collective and its utopian dream. These images were the Benjaminian tool that had the potential to lead the dreaming collective to the moment of its awakening.

According to Kifle Biseat (personal communication, February 26, 2009), this series was also a response to aspects of Césaire's Negritude that strived for the affirmation of black culture. Moreover, Biseat (ibid) also said: "Skunder believed that he was profoundly nourished by Césaire, Anta Diop and other friends like the African American novelist Chester Himes to begin questioning European racial and colonial hegemony and to recognize the need for structural organic unity of African culture." He spent a lot of time at the Musée de L'homme at Trocadero where the static figure of the 'rootless' Negro was represented in a state of ethnographic anonymity. He recognized that these objects were taken out of time as the unchanging 'Other' of a fictional construct of European identity formation. For Boghossian, it was the ideological and philosophical character of these objects, as well as the dynamics of power within the museum that found the intellectual, legal, and ethical grounds for making decisions about how African cultures and material heritage are treated and displayed, that was of critical concern. His experiences of the Musée de L'homme, that of African art and its imposed representation, determined Boghossian's visual construction of the pastel, gouache and ink series of the *Nourishers*.

In 1963, when Boghossian had completed the *Nourishers* series, Louise Atcheson, a Parisienne art critic said: "Skunder's figures painted with graphic precision and a dexterity of line, rise vertically in totemic design, speaking to each other sensually in a dialogue of organic force." (Atcheson as cited in Deressa, 1965, p.22) Indeed, African aesthetics is a composite that consists of form, spirit, action, oral saga, and symbolic meaning which communicate meaning within their individual selves and in combination. In images that made an invisible world present alongside the visible one, Boghossian's *Nourishers* series interpreted beautifully what was seen through objects of the imagination. With symbols and signs, he mediated coherent meaningful images and meaningful temporal horizons; between time and eternity into a

comprehensive context of meaning. For instance, of the painting *Jujus Flight of Delight and Terror* (see Figure 2.3)<sup>14</sup> Deressa (1997, p.13) said: “As terrifying vast births take place, space penetrates space, spaces are nested within spaces. The vision menaces and delights at the same time. Images both attack and play. No doubt, reading Tutuola had something to do with the initial conceptualization of this canvas, but nothing in Tutuola leads to the range of energy in this painting.”



Figure 2.3 Skunder (Alexander) Boghossian *Night Flight of Dread and Delight*, 1964, oil on canvas with collage, 56 5/8 x 62 5/8. North Carolina Art Museum, Retrieved April 20,2007,[http://www.ncmoa.org/collections/highlights/African/skunder\\_lrg.shtml](http://www.ncmoa.org/collections/highlights/African/skunder_lrg.shtml).

Boghossian found in Tutuola not only the refusal of systematic conceptuality but also the absence of narrative. Instead, he found the representation of allegorical images playing stimulus to his ‘optic,’ his visual thinking, thinking in images and

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix for description.

images as bearers of meaning. Nigerian writer, Amos Tutuola gained fame with his story *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. The book was based on Yoruba folktales in a transcription of Pidgin English and recounted the mythological tale of a drunken man, who follows his dead tapster into 'Deads' Town', a world of magic, ghosts, demons, and supernatural beings. Solomon Deressa (1997, p.15) wrote:

Skunder read the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* some time in 1962 or 63, a critical juncture in his development as an artist. It is difficult to imagine how the paintings that were done during the period that started in 1963 (the whole *Nourishers Series* and the truly magical large paintings like *Juju's Flight of Terror and Delight*, *fertility Icon*, *Song of Eclipse*) would have turned out had Tutuola not come into the picture. African art had led Skunder to a vibrant plastic vocabulary and a wider home base than Ethiopia. Tutuola brought into the verbal realm imagery that had been simmering just below the thin surface of the preconscious.

In 1964, Boghossian had his first solo exhibition at the *Galerie Lambert* of which Deressa has said the Paris critics were almost unanimous in their positive appraisal. Solomon Deressa (1965, p.23) himself wrote:

True, his colours (five years ago) exploded with the intensity and directness of the equatorial sun. True, his 1963 canvases glow with the subdued rage of a hearth covered up to last the night and come to flames with the needs of dawn. But, is it ethnic origin for the one and change of continent for the other that we are going to haul up for explanation? Be that as it may, neither origin nor any other circumstantial event would, if volunteered as explanation, be of much help to the spectator of the twelve canvases that composed the *Galerie Lambert* exhibit.

It was after this exhibition that Boghossian got invited to join the *avant-garde Phase* movement in which Wilfredo Lam had once participated. In the later part of 1964, Boghossian left *Phase* and worked with the founder of Surrealism, Andre Breton, and in 1965 he participated at the fourth *Biennale de Paris*. It was in this same year that

he had been presented in the international Roman avant-garde Movement *Manifesto Actuale* as the youngest painter chosen for the occasion. Boghossian's works in Paris not only deconstructed the opportunistic text that glorified modernism's notion of authenticity but also served as a focused response to the period's vibrant debate of an alternative African modernity. For Boghossian, the consciousness of being an African in the diaspora in some degree was also an awareness of what it meant politically to be black. To be politically black was to contribute to the rethinking of African and the African Diaspora self image spiritually, by presenting the synthesis of this particular culture's understanding of the creative principle and its place in the cosmos. It was also to recognize an alternative historicity of African cultural production and that the objects of expression even if not now 'alive' once 'were.'

For scholars like Richard Powell, Skunder Boghossian hence was part of a genre of African and African American artists in Paris who had access to a whole range of black expressive culture. Powell (1997, p.114) said:

Skunder's tight involvement in Paris with cultures like 'Presence Africaine' and Camus' Black Orpheus significantly altered his work curiously making it both pan-African and universal...an artistic balancing act that he, along with his fellow universalists, had perfected, and one that Sartre believed would push them out of "past particularisms" and into "future universalisms" which in turn would ultimately enact 'the twilight of their negritude.'

Powell has stressed that Boghossian's work was a radical critique of racism and exclusion. He believes that for Boghossian, being an African in the diaspora was to an extensive degree an awareness of what it meant to be a racialized subject that privileged some and excluded others, i.e. the relations of dominance and subordination. Boghossian's experimentation with calligraphic art in Paris is also important to mention as it was an added dimension to his work where words were presented in ways that were both graphic and calligraphic, overturned and upturned, sensible and yet illusory.

One read a theme of symbolism, and the power accorded to the word. He started working on calligraphy in Paris, heavily influenced by Ibrahim El-Salahi of Sudan, who at the time was working on Arabic calligraphy. Boghossian joked that an Ethiopian always wanted abstraction with a bit of realism, and is the reason why he started creating the *Feedel Series*.<sup>15</sup> His use of the Amharic letters ranged from humor to satire where words like *hateraw*<sup>16</sup> were represented laced from sacred profanity to penetrating parody, delightfully ambiguous and simultaneously featuring many rounds of interpretation.

Skunder Boghossian's art and its contextual meaning had influenced a generation of artists even before his return to Ethiopia. He returned to Ethiopia in 1966 and taught at the Fine Art School for three years where he became particularly immersed in Ethiopian mythology, reflecting as he had done in Paris on the relationship between national consciousnesses and art. In 1969, he immigrated to the United States. For him, the pairing of art and its social context was inseparable. Boghossian's fundamental respect for the ancestral powers that were so prevalent in his works in Paris, and their significance as the ultimate justice bearers, extended itself even more after his return to Ethiopia. He turned Ethiopian cultural objects into fiction and Ethiopian icons into discourse.

While this is not a chapter on the history of Ethiopian traditional art, it is relevant to have a brief historical background of Christian traditional art and the academy that frames it if one is to understand Skunder Boghossian's work after 1966. Boghossian brought back from Paris the technical dexterity of European art and,

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<sup>15</sup> The author spent four years with Skunder Boghossian. The personal interjections by the author about the artists' various reflections are based on this personal communication with the artist during a four year span.

<sup>16</sup> *Hateraw* is an Oromo (another dominant dialect besides the official language of Amharic) word. It is usually known in its allusion of profanity. The usage of the word on Skunder's canvasses nevertheless is playful and is generally characteristics of parody.

according to Deressa (1997, p.17), “the awesome depth of the continent wide black African perception of mystery.” His works after coming back to Ethiopia left an incredible mark on the trajectory of Ethiopian modernism where Boghossian’s signature continues to tremendously filter into works of contemporary artists. It is therefore crucial and necessary to investigate the source and insight of these works and their historical and intellectual exploration that profoundly affected the evolution of modern Ethiopian art.

### ***Ethiopian Christian Traditional Art***

Ethiopian paintings of illustrated manuscripts, church murals, and paintings on wood have been produced over ten centuries, and much of this heritage is preserved in old churches and monasteries. The most important source of Ethiopian traditional painting is the introduction of Christianity into Ethiopia in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. For centuries, Christianity has been the dominant factor in Ethiopian political life and an important component of Christian education was the art of painting. What makes Ethiopian church paintings unique is that paintings are believed to possess the power of intercession in that the saint or the holy person represented can communicate with the individual. For centuries, the nobility financed the construction and decoration of churches in order to attain salvation.

Apocryphal texts, such as the Miracles of Mary, homilies, and hagiographies of saints dictated the rules of the paintings where colors were made from plants and soil. Paintings were also ways of conveying stories of saints as well as the theology of the Church. Painters worked by moving from place to place, which led to the similarity of styles of paintings of particular periods. To become pure and spiritually superior, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church supports chastity and abstinence specifically through fasting, and this austere ideal is central in the workings of the image. Goha Tsbeha, a

professor of theology, remarked: “The rule is that the painter must not be a sinner; he must be pure, religious. If someone prays on such painting, God can work miracles. The painting speaks and it also cures.” (Tsbeha as quoted in Mercier, 1997, p.72) An image given to the Church must be blessed by an abbot, monk or priest known to be pure. Wall paintings in the Church are covered by cloth except for special occasions like a particular saint’s monthly feast when the priests show the image of that particular saint to the sick to be kissed and touched.

There are over 200 original hagiographies in Ge'ez<sup>17</sup> about Ethiopian saints. Most of these hagiographies have not been translated to Amharic,<sup>18</sup> making them inaccessible to Ethiopian scholars who do not understand Ge-Ez, let alone European scholars who do not understand either Ge-Ez or Amharic. It is these hagiographies that the painter narrates in the paintings. The hagiographies of saints are not mere translations from other Christian texts, but are adaptations to Ethiopian particularities, and they stand as literary works of art in their own right. According to Ullendorff (1967, p.150), these hagiography texts *are conveyed into the spirit and ambiance of Christian Abyssinia*. For instance, the Miracles of Mary consists of a number of miracles that were performed by the Virgin on Lake Tana:<sup>19</sup> *Beseluwam fit segedu Iselwa yalsegede sem aterarum ayetawek Lisemaw*.<sup>20</sup> These kinds of lines are cyclical

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<sup>17</sup> Ge'ez is referred to as Ethiopic and is an ancient South Semitic language. It developed in northern Ethiopia and later became the official language of the Kingdom of Axum and the Ethiopian Imperial Court. Today Ge'ez remains as the main language used in the liturgy of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

<sup>18</sup> Amharic is a Semitic language that derives from the Ge-ez. It is written, with some adaptations, with the Ge-ez alphabet and is the official working language of the country.

<sup>19</sup> Located in the northwestern part of the Ethiopian highlands, Lake Tana is the source of the Blue Nile and is the largest lake in Ethiopia. The lake has a number of islands with monasteries which house the remains of ancient Ethiopian emperors and treasures of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It is said that the Virgin Mary rested in one of the islands on her journey back from Egypt. It is also said that Frmentius who first introduced Christianity to Ethiopia is buried in one of the monasteries called Tana Chirqos. The monasteries are believed to rest on earlier religious sites and include the fourteenth century Debre Maryam, the eighteenth century Narga Selassie and Tana Qirqos which is said to have housed the Ark of the Covenant before it was moved to Axum.

<sup>20</sup> This line is imbued with layered meanings, or the ‘Wax and Gold’ of the language. It is very hard to translate word-by-word because of the Amharic’s double meaning to a word. It generally means that

and recurring in all apocryphal and hagiographic texts, and one has to understand its layered meaning, the ‘Wax and Gold’ of the language which I will discuss below if one is to indulge in the visual component of its narrative.

Ethiopian myths have multiple meanings, and are many times mutually constitutive, one becoming necessary for the other’s existence, and they regulate the pace, range, and distribution of values. However, their subtle and nuanced harmony and cohesion that simultaneously incorporates its enigmatic dimension has been complicated by the lack of written academic scholarship by local scholars who can relate to the fine distinction of the language that frames it. While pictorial and iconographic documentation are important reflections of the values and attitudes of the Ethiopian society, the deficiency of written scholarship has often reduced these monumental art forms to shadows of their former selves. Instead, written scholarship had been dominated by scholars in an approach that pays little attention to the codex’s meaning, often times with problematic translations based on purely pragmatic grounds and in some cases on Eurocentric stereotypes.

For instance, in the most recurring theme of the Church’s wall painting of the *Miracle of Belae Sebe’e*, the legend of the cannibal depicted in the text of the *Miracles of Mary*, Elizabeth Biasio has spectacularized a Eurocentric ‘Otherization’ in the legend. In this miracle, the cannibal is described as coming from a Christian noble family who did not eat the flesh of animals but only that of humans. He ate about 78 humans including his wife, friends and relatives. One day he was walking down the road when he met a farmer. He wanted to eat the farmer when he realized he was too

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believers should venerate the Virgin in such a way that they bow to the paintings of the Virgin. Whoever does not bow to the Virgin will remain nameless and would not even be acknowledged as a human being by other believers. When the word ‘nameless’ is conceptualized, however, it means that the person is not worthy of even being a human being and he/she might as well be dead. Therefore, nameless does not necessarily mean simply a person without a name, but it also means ‘worthless.’ In the Christian conception, if one is worthless, one may as well be dead.

strong to be had. Instead, he wanted to barter an ox and offered him his cow, plated with gold, and his arrow. The farmer recognized the cannibal and refused to take his offer. The cannibal left and met another man on the road, a beggar who was infested with leprosy. The cannibal was disgusted with the idea of eating him. The beggar was thirsty and pleaded for water using the name of the Virgin. The cannibal gave him very little water on the beggar's third request.

The cannibal then died when the angels of darkness took his soul and cast it into hell. The Virgin Mary then came to the Son of God and asked compassion to save the cannibal's soul. The Son of God asked that the souls the cannibal devoured be weighted against the water that he gave the thirsty man. The angels weighted them, and the little water he gave to the beggar outweighed the souls he had gulped down. The cannibal was thus saved. This legend of the Miracles of Mary is unique to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and cannot be found in other texts. The interpretation given by European scholars of this legend and others like it is nevertheless disturbing. Biasio, curator at the Völkerkundemuseum of the University of Zürich, has worked on Ethiopian traditional art refers to another European scholar Wallis Budge, who could not find an equivalent text in the Latin, and had commented on this same legend. Biasio's (2000, p.67) remark is as follows:

Budge says that because great emphasis is laid on cannibalism, he thought that the man was an African chief living in the southern or western part of Ethiopia. I do not agree with Budge on this point, because the legend clearly describes the cannibal is a nobleman and a Christian, but it left open the question "why is he a cannibal?" The painter however, felt it necessary to give an explanation for the behavior of this man, who was a Christian and a noble. So he introduced two darker skinned strangers, evidently coming from Southern Ethiopia who seduced him to cannibalism. In the first scene of the painting, Belae Sebe appears as a respectable man with a fair complexion properly dressed in his shamma, in front of his house but in

the later scene he changes, becoming more and more primitive as a cannibal with his hair ruffed up.

My question is not so much with Biasio's conclusion of the legend, but with the meaning she attaches to the conclusion and to what it essentially means to be a 'primitive' African within a paradigm of Western discourse in non-Western societies. What is more troubling is her tendency to promote the northern Christian part of Ethiopia as culturally superior, than its non-Christian southern part which supplemented the explorer tales of what Mudimbe (1994, p.69) had called "the philosophical interpretations about a hierarchy of civilizations." Western scholars have historically affirmed the foundation myth of Ethiopian Christianity and archived the rest of its multi-cultural entity as 'African' or 'primitive,' because Christianity in the Western eye is perceived to be the faith of the civilized world and is in the general framework of European moral superiority that differentiate the European from the inferior races of the non-Christian world. While these are often the types of art historical study that have been deliberated by European scholars, hagiographies and apocryphal texts are cryptic, complex, and poetic, imbuing in them multi-layered meanings and interpretations that these scholars often neglect to incorporate. Moreover, these texts also in some cases include non-Christian variations, perhaps deriving from its non-Christian cultural influences which I will explain below, and more importantly that Skunder Boghossian got immersed in his works.

The period of the Christian Ethiopian state's expansion in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is an important moment in the construction of modern Ethiopian identities. This era saw the birth of an indigenous written literature consisting largely of chronicles of the activities of the Christian missionaries who, moving in the tracks of the royal troops, converted the pagan population. Ethiopian hagiographers, while following literary models inherited from Byzantium, allowed some elements of the pre-existing religions to filter through. (Mercier, 1997, p.135)

Mercier has said that among these early religions was the practice of prophecy in trance states. Other fascinating interpretations can also be deduced from these texts to produce a body of good work on Ethiopian Christian traditional art. Let us again take a line in the Miracles of Mary as it is stated: *Emebetachn maryam leamlak yedesta maderia honechew*.<sup>21</sup> Along with this statement, one can interrogate the images of the nursing Virgin with the bare breast that is depicted in the many iconographies of the Virgin Mary, an image charged with multiple layers of meaning; the breast and maternal devotion, on the one hand, and the sensual and erotic, on the other.

While understanding the vernacular language is crucial to translating the obscurity, the ambiguity, and the secrecy of these texts, being part of the culture and its intricacies becomes also important. Understanding Ge-ez, the liturgical script, is the best way to understand Ethiopian traditional art or Ethiopian religious script since the narrative of the paintings is solely based on hagiographies and apocryphal texts. Although some texts like the Miracles of Mary have been interpreted into Amharic, most still remain in Ge-ez. The script and the image are continuous, in that they are one while at the same time different. They come from the same source of mythic conceptions and beliefs. It is extremely difficult for secular people who are solely Amharic language speakers, a language that is directly derived from Ge'ez, to interpret liturgical scripts or meanings. It is also important to note that speaking and fully comprehending the deep layers of Amharic is by far preferable than not speaking at all if one is ever going to indulge in the analysis of Ethiopian traditional art.

The Amharic language itself is full of puns, wits and layered meanings. The 'Wax and Gold' is the most dominant form of the poetic expression of the Amharic

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<sup>21</sup> Again, this is a 'Wax and Gold' interpretation of the Miracles of Mary. The general translation is, 'Our Lady became the nightly happy home of God.' One may interpret this in an erotic way that implies the ecstasy of God by being with the Virgin to conceive Jesus Christ.

language. The apparent figurative meaning is called the ‘Wax’ while the hidden and significant meaning is called the ‘Gold.’ *Wax and Gold*, said philosopher Messay Kebede (1999, p.182), “is the art of discovering and reinstating the truth.” Kebede believes that the ‘Wax and Gold’ corresponds with the Ethiopian conception of the divine. “For the Ethiopian,” Kebede (ibid) has said, “there is a fundamental duality in the nature of God and that the mystery of God and his omnipotence constitute the dyad appearance-essence”. Therefore, essence and appearance are fundamental in the conception of things. The ‘Wax and Gold’ is prevalent in the everyday language of Amharic and is especially ubiquitous in the Ge-ez liturgical script. The concept of ‘Wax and Gold’ is intrinsic in the images of Ethiopian traditional art but the ontology of knowledge implicit in the paintings that is derivative of Ethiopian Orthodox religious studies is absent in the scholarly works of Ethiopian traditional art.

Philosopher Messay Kebede again has explained the metaphysics of the Ethiopian psyche through this comprehension of ‘Wax and Gold’ of essence and appearance, and has incorporated it into Ethiopian traditional painting. He has said: “Despite its relative technical sophistication, its bare and skimpy aspect as compared with European painting (which is full of flesh, color, volume and form) is evidence of a deliberately impoverishing conception of sensuous reality. God is signified not so much by magnificence as by contrast of the kind which makes physical presentations poorer than their contents.” (Kebede, 1999, p.184) He continues saying that, “Ethiopian art is more symbolic than representative or descriptive. Western scholars do not find Ethiopian artistic creations beautiful, any more than they think them technically sophisticated or even realistic.” (ibid)

As said earlier, the academy that has framed Ethiopian traditional art is not organized by Ethiopian scholars, but by many Europeans, with Stanislas Chojnacki, a Pole who came to Ethiopia as a librarian in the early sixties, leading the discourse.

Chojnacki is mainly concerned with formalist interpretations of classifications and techniques as well as Ethiopian paintings' influences from Western and Eastern art, rather than the mythology of the theosis. Although Chojnacki has lived in the country for over forty years, he does not speak Amharic let alone understand the liturgical script, Ge-ez. His scholarship is primarily object-centered, hence making it difficult for him to actually grasp the dyad of essence and appearance. His foundational narrative is generally based on traveler's documents and colonial archives that earlier scholars like Jules Leroy and Oto Jager had used. Nevertheless, he remains to be the only scholar who has widely dealt in Ethiopian traditional art and his scholarship is the primary document that has set the introductory account of the subject.

I believe that it is important to critically look at Ethiopian traditional art within the discourse that surrounds it and its incongruity to Boghossian's works that continually sought to heighten the African experience in its many shapes and forms. It is important to situate the two conceptual frameworks of epistemological Eurocentrism, where the Africa in question is defined as lacking in the scholarship of Ethiopian traditional art, and Boghossian's anti-discourse, which ushered a new perspective to an alternative exploration of the art. In a visceral way, Boghossian imaginatively responded to the illuminations of manuscripts and the astonishing visual unity of the icons and Church murals through an overt connection to the spiritual and abstract dimensions of African art. Not only did he absorb himself in the images of the Church after coming back from Paris, but also in canvases full of time, memories, historical events and symbols, Boghossian also presented his colliding identities in a wider social and political context of Africanness where modernity was at once epistemological and historical. Through process and ephemerality, he simultaneously attended to: St. George the dragon which is a frequent image in the Coptic repertoire, the Akan fertility

spirit of Ghana, the eagle that is prevalent in many Ethiopian and other African cultural contexts, and all the other symbols of African social narratives.

It is this fundamental link between African cultures that scholars who have studied Ethiopian traditional art disinterestedly contemplate. Boghossian's art therefore brings a new insight to a narrative of discovery and interpretation of Ethiopian traditional art within African aesthetics and the integration of these two fields of knowledge into one discourse. He sought to rupture essentialist assumptions of Ethiopian traditional art by dislocating the normative indices of Christian aesthetic cognition that European scholars are interested in, to instead produce alternative explanations. It is from this perspective that I want to elucidate the construction of the scholarship of Ethiopian traditional art and situate Boghossian's works that are within and simultaneously hostile to the logic and framework that governs the academy.

Although scholarly works of Ethiopian Christian traditional art are predominantly based on the assumption that it lies outside the circle of African aesthetics, it is nevertheless worth noting the work of Jacques Mercier who in his interpretation of ritual and symbol of Ethiopian healing art suggested new avenues of inquiry and interpretation about the nature of African influence on the art. In his most important work, *Art that Heals, the Image as Medicine in Ethiopia*, Mercier (1997, p.35) stated:

Ethiopian material culture shares traits with other African cultures, while also being marked in some aspects by relations with the east (the Middle East and the Orient) and the west. When westerners developed an intellectual interest in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, Ethiopia was largely classed with Byzantine world, and Africanists ignored it. This situation continued through the twentieth century. The principal reason for this absence of Ethiopia, however, can be related to its independence and its isolation.

Mercier's book is the only work written by a European that attempts to incorporate substantive analysis of indigenized interpretation of Ethiopian medicinal art. His work will be extensively explored later in the text when I investigate Boghossian's absorption with the medicinal scroll. It is important to expound in detail the academic constitution of Ethiopian Christian traditional art. I also want to assert that while it is centrally important to decode the liturgical script from within, i.e. from church scholars themselves whose unwritten knowledge of the script has endured many generations, it is also crucial to recognize the practical insights that European scholarship has contributed to the erudition of traditional art.

Ethiopian Christian art has been described by Europeans as Byzantine Art in an African setting, dedicated to Biblical themes, and manifesting itself in icons, wall paintings and manuscript illustrations. Ethiopia's myth as a Christian Empire, the guardianship of Christianity entrusted to a people headed by monarchs perceived as instruments of God, pervaded in the Christian European psyche. There is a fascination amongst Europeans by this concept of Ethiopian mystic Christianity and for many years they have distinguished the country as a 'non African nation.' Jules Leroy, a French specialist in the iconography of Near Eastern illuminated manuscripts and wall paintings, who is one of the early European scholars who wrote on Ethiopian traditional art, has said that "although the Ethiopian inhabits Africa, he is not an African in the usual sense in which the word is understood. His complexion, his physical features, as much as his language and original culture, declare him to be a Semite, related to the Arabs. It is this fact that Ethiopia is first and foremost a Christian country that gives her this individual character and ensures her a special place among the black African nations." (Leroy, 1964, p.8)

During a stay in Addis-Ababa, in 1959, as the Director of the Department of Archeology of the Institut d'Études et de Recherches d'Éthiopie, Leroy became

interested in Ethiopian manuscripts and wall paintings. He has published a number of publications including his 1964 *La pittura etiopica durante il Medioevo e sotto la dinastia di Gondar*, which is a general outline of Christian painting in Ethiopia in the late Middle Ages and during the Gondar period (the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup> Century). In describing a manuscript of the four gospels, Leroy (1964, p.10) said:

This kind of Gospel with an illustrated front piece is very familiar to anyone who has studied the history of the book. It was exceptionally popular in all the Christian nations in the East: each characteristic made use of it, and Ethiopia in her turn, when she adopted the form, impressed her individual stamp on it. But it must be admitted that most of the examples available to us of manuscripts from the fourteenth century are unsightly in appearance, any pleasure to be derived from these unprepossessing paintings is due to their faithful adherence to a tradition of decoration which has its roots in the most distant past of Christian civilization. But when these Ethiopian manuscripts are compared with the fine Oriental models from which they have been copied, they seem childish and not a genuine work of art.

Ethiopian Christian traditional art therefore frames itself within these two contradictory narratives of exceptionalism and primitivism, as well as through sources of travelers' documents and colonial archives. On the one hand, the narrative transcribed Orthodox Christianity as a triumphed national narrative of Ethiopia's greatness, which contributed to its 'non-Africanness,' and on the other it denigrates its artistic skill that could never compare itself to the European version of its articulation. Most of the claim of influence comes from the document of Francesco Alvarez (1465-1541), a Portuguese missionary and explorer who was a chaplain priest and almoner to Dom Manuel, King of Portugal, and who was sent in 1515 on an embassy to the King of Abyssinia (Lebne Dengel). It is widely believed that the information in Alvarez's document must be received with caution since he was prone to exaggerate, and did not confine himself to what came within his own observation.

Stanislas Chojnacki's major work, *Major Themes in Ethiopian Paintings* particularly focuses on proving the kinship of Ethiopian Christian art to that of European or Byzantine art, rather than the configuration of the objects' underlying meanings. Chojnacki follows Leroy's classification of Ethiopian traditional paintings into two periods; the Medieval and the Gonderane. The end of the first period coincides with the invasion of Ahmed Gran<sup>22</sup> in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Leroy has said that the invasion of Gran brought the Christian Empire of Lebne Dengel<sup>23</sup> to the verge of destruction, but also resulted in "a break through to a new school of painting. What interests us here are the cultural and artistic results of Gran's presence. They were not all bad. Even though that war was responsible for the destruction of innumerable works of art, it did bring some advantages through the influx of foreigners, which, as usual, Ethiopia saw as a means of cultural enrichment." (Leroy, 1964, p.9) Leroy talked about the presence of the Portuguese who had survived Gran's invasion around that time and the coming of the Jesuits about which he said: "The influence of the Portuguese on the cultural destiny of the country was considerably strengthened by the arrival of a group of Jesuits.-The Gondarene dynasty achieved nothing, only in the realm of art did the Gondarene period achieve anything new." (Leroy, 1964, p.9)

Chojnacki has also concurred with this divide, not in Leroy's sweeping claim of Jesuits' influence, but in Ethiopian Christian traditional art of the medieval period of the 14<sup>th</sup> century as being closely linked with and influenced by the Byzantine world, while during the Gondarene (modern) period "the impetus and the pattern came from

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<sup>22</sup> The Portuguese paid a visit to the court of Emperor Lebne Dengel (1508-1540) with the main aim of spreading Catholicism and to form an alliance with the Christian state of Ethiopia which they hoped would eventually enable them to fight the Turks. Lebne Dengel was not warm to establishing close ties with the Portuguese. The visit from the Portuguese did not go unnoticed by the Turks who sent an army to invade the Christian empire when Lebne Dengel sought help from the Portuguese that he had turned away.

<sup>23</sup> Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (1506-1543) was an Imam and General who invaded Ethiopia causing much damage on the kingdom with the help of an army mainly composed of Somalis. Nicknamed Ahmad Gran (Gran meaning the left handed) he embarked on a conquest which brought three-quarters of Ethiopia under the power of the Muslim Sultanates of Adal during the Ethiopian Adal War from 1529-43.

the Western world.” (Chojnacki, 1983, p.46) The First Gondarene is supposed to have ended with Iyasu I (1682-1706). The Second Gondarene is represented by the mode of garments and the soft drawings and coloring of the figures. Before discussing the artistic styles of the First and Second Gondarene periods, I will deliberate on the presence of the Jesuits in Ethiopia and their heavily emphasized influence on Ethiopian culture and art by European scholars. Chojnacki’s many claims regarding influence in *Major Themes in Ethiopian Paintings* are based on the short presence of the Jesuits whose culture, according to local scholars, failed to sustain after their expulsion. According to these local scholars, most of the Jesuits’ paintings were burnt down by Orthodox Christian followers.

European scholars, however, continuously refer to the Jesuit influence rather than the continued cross-cultural influences of the non-Christian entity in Ethiopia itself and the non-Western world surrounding Ethiopia. For instance, the Islam/Christian connection was especially visible with the coming of the Jesuits in the late sixteenth century and their attempt to overpower the Ethiopian Church. Backed by a Portuguese military expedition and the support of King Susenyos,<sup>24</sup> who converted to Catholicism in 1622, the Jesuits made great attempt to overpower the Christian Church and convert it to Catholicism. The great resistance against the Jesuits, which threatened to bring

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<sup>24</sup> Susenyos was king from 1606-1632. He was interested in Catholicism because of Pedro Paez’s persuasion and was hoping for military help from Portugal and Spain. Susenyos wanted help against the Oromo who were invading from the south, and in putting down constant internal rebellion. He showed the Jesuit missionaries his favor by a number of land grants, most importantly those at Gorgora located on the northern shore of Lake Tana. In 1613, Susenyos sent a mission to Madrid and Rome in an attempt to reach Malindi, a port on the Indian Ocean in what is Kenya today, to break a blockade that the Ottoman conquests had created around the Ethiopian empire. The mission failed to reach Malindi, due to delays caused by local Christians hostile to the mission. Spain and Portugal never sent the army that Susenyos had requested. Susenyos nevertheless converted to Catholicism in 1622 in a public ceremony. Strife and rebellions over the enforced changes to Catholicism began within days, especially when he proclaimed the primacy of Rome and condemned local practices. In 1630, the Viceroy of Begemder proclaimed Susenyos's son Fasiladas emperor and the viceroy was captured and hanged. Two years later, Susenyos's brother Malta Krestos revolted and this revolt was put down at the cost of 8,000 lives. This purposeless loss of life depressed Susenyos and so he granted his subjects freedom of worship, in effect restoring the traditional Ethiopian Church. He later abdicated in favor of his son Fasiledes.

about a civil war, led to the abdication of King Susenyos and the expulsion of Jesuits from Ethiopia. Protestantism and Judaism also tried to overpower the church. The only religion that moderately expanded was Islam.

As Messay Kebede (1999, p.44) has said: “The reason why Catholicism appeared more dangerous to Ethiopian Christianity than Islam is yet to be explored. Islam, he says, exerted a wider attraction which was difficult to counter. Moreover, from the start it touched people involved in trade activities, thus lessening its hold on the elites and thereby its threat on the unity of state and Church.” Although the study of Islam and its heritage is tantamount to the comprehension of Ethiopian history, European scholars like Stanislas Chojnacki who have extensively studied Ethiopian Christian art have excluded the influence or cross-cultural connection of Islam like it has never been part of Ethiopian history. Although they talk about change in styles of paintings after Ahmed Gran, they fall short of articulating what these changes were. They have instead vilified Islam by continuously bringing up Ahmed Gran (1529-1543) and his destruction of churches. Gran was defeated by Portuguese military collaboration with Christian Ethiopians. This collaboration served the Portuguese’s strategic interests in their regional rivalry with the Ottoman Turks for control of the trade routes in the Red Sea and the northwestern sector of the Indian Ocean. It is true that the reign of Gran caused mayhem and destruction particularly to churches, monasteries, and Christian heritage. Nevertheless, Gran’s atrocities should not annihilate the fact that Christians and Muslims lived by side by side for centuries in Ethiopia.

For European scholars, the invasion of Ahmed Gran is also an indicator in periodizing Ethiopian Christian traditional art. While anything prior to Ahmed Gran is considered to be heavily influenced by Byzantine art, the works after Gran are classified into First and Second Gondarene periods. I have explained the rationale of

this divide through Leroy's analysis in the above text. In *Major Themes in Ethiopian Paintings*, Chojnacki also examines major paintings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and evaluates their classifications and techniques where paintings are also cataloged into First and Second Gondarene styles. For instance, Chojnacki takes *The Flight into Egypt*,<sup>25</sup> which is a major theme in Ethiopian iconography, and groups this particular painting according to chronology and style. When discussing the First Gondarene style, he said:

Found in the 17<sup>th</sup> century book of miniatures, in the *stadt und universitatsbibliothek*, Frankfort on the Main, is painted in first Gondarene style, indeed Mary sitting on a donkey, nurses the child supporting her breast with her right hand no left hand is shown. The donkey has unusually long ears probably to emphasize that the beast is indeed a donkey and not a mule. (Chojnacki, 1983, p.47)

The Second Gondarene style is described as:

The subject of the flight into Egypt in the second Gondarene style shows the same composition but with further elaboration of details, Mary mounted on a white donkey nurses her child---she supports her conspicuous breasts with her right hand and the head of her son with her left hand the upper part of her body is wrapped in a blue cloak decorated with a rosette pattern according to the Second Gondarene mode. (Chojnacki, 1983, p.48)

According to Chojnacki (1983, p.48): "The above survey shows ample documentation on the 13<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century developments of iconography of the 'Flight into Egypt.' It appears that the middle of the seventeenth century marks the major rendering of the subject. Before that date, Ethiopians composed their own image of the flight into Egypt while after that date they copied the engraving in the *Evangelium Arabicum*."

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<sup>25</sup> The Flight into Egypt is described in the Gospel of Matthew in which Joseph fled into Egypt with his wife Mary and infant son Jesus after a visit by the Magi. They had heard that King Herod had intended to kill the infants of that area. This flight is a common depiction in the murals of many of the Ethiopian Churches.

The detour to giving a brief background of Ethiopian Christian traditional art and the construction of its academy is necessary if one is to explore Skunder Boghossian's works in depth. Moreover, what is important in bringing up this brief introduction of Ethiopian Christian traditional art is also to acknowledge the complete omission by European scholars of trans-cultural influences from the neighboring countries of Ethiopia; Sudan, Egypt, Kenya and Uganda which Boghossian easily fused into many of his works and which one can easily identify in Ethiopian Christian traditional paintings and architectural forms. For instance, the concept that Boghossian refers to as *kulflfu* (the interlocked) or *hareg* (weaving) and that is found in every page of the illuminated manuscripts can be easily explained in indigenous and cross cultural African contexts. His weaving compositions which he calls *kulflfu* follow his fascination of the *hareg* which he connects to the unique consistency of Ethiopian handicrafts (the basket, the Ethiopian national dress, etc.). He embellished his paintings with these same patterns and with a delicate and yet chaotic relationships of African symbols and images. Over the course of a series of interviews I had with Boghossian from 1999-2003, he said: "The mentality of the aesthetic value in the African world, is that they allow themselves to learn from each other, 'ezaw bezaw' 'erasu berasu' (on top of another and right there and then). One does not compete with the other, one color complements the other as if learning from the prior one, just like one learns from the elder and work on the elder's work to come up with something higher."

### ***The Ethiopia Years (1963-1969)***

*Seeing one of my paintings, my Zebeigna exclaimed, 'Getoch, but that's a dream! (Biseat, personal communication, February 26, 2009)*

What was this unceasing dream that Boghossian engrossed himself in after returning back to Ethiopia? What are the symbols that Boghossian tried to depict? What

are the symbols that he used to communicate the complex knowledge of good and evil, and the abstract truths and ideas about life and its meanings as sources of insight into African orientations to life? If one is to look into Boghossian's paintings from 1966-1969 such as *Juju's Wedding* (see Figure 2.2) one sees the existence of a whole different world that came through African mythological cryptograms. He found this in the Ethiopian Church iconographies just as he had found it in Paris at the Musee de L'Homme in Trocadero, only this time he was able to unite these two together. He situated agency in the core of past analysis that shed light on present day knowledge. He explored new possibilities against the marginal perception of the oppressed, promoting a conscious model of modernity that valorized those aspects of intellectual and creative activity that were excluded from mainstream art projects. By positing a historical continuity of 'Africanness' or 'blackness,' extending from early civilizations of Africa, to Ethiopian Orthodoxy and its variant expressions, he skillfully managed to combine two seemingly contradictory themes; a traditional approach towards cultural self-definition and its complex tie with the historical development of European art.

While the Paris years presented new spiritual viewpoints and fresh imagery about Africa and the African experience, his works after he returned to Ethiopia mediated spaces between tradition and modernity, particularly that of the tradition of the Orthodox Church, its mysterious journey of the soul, and the understanding of the modern world within this theosis. The Orthodox icon which elucidates the incarnation for humanity and the world and the possibility to attain union with God is one of history's most sophisticated analyses of the nature and function of art. For many Ethiopian believers, icons of the Orthodox Church strictly serve as the link between the human and the divine and are only worshipped as instruments of miraculous intervention. They provide valor and strength in a world marked by tragedy and suffering. Yet for a few others in the same Orthodox Church, they serve as the

antithesis of the immaculate and as medicine, or a mere synthesis of the pre-Christian vision of ancestors whose pristine purpose is to ward off evil with the power of devotional Christian texts. It is this unique blend of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity that unifies pre-Christian indigenous practices with religious beliefs that fascinated Boghossian and lured him to this type of work for the remainder of his life. This harmonious and yet ambiguous fusion between animism and divinity, between the pagan and the Christian, is the source of his luminous scrolls. For Boghossian, the fortitude of the pagan and the unadulterated spirituality of the Christian became one and the same. He called these scrolls “dancing scrolls, the ju jus in celebration to the glories of the gods.” (Boghossian, personal communication, 1999-2003)

One could say he followed Afro-Cuban artist Wilfredo Lam’s amity with *Santeria*, a religion rooted in African culture. Boghossian was acquainted with Lam and his works while he was in Paris. *Santeria* is famous for its magic based on the mysteries of the gods. To interact with them is to better one’s life. A thematic play of a particular understanding of modernity and modern subjectivity among people of African descent, *Santeria* had been the source of Lam’s ‘mythical totemism.’ The effects of Lam’s ‘mythical totemism’ are evident in Boghossian’s works after he had returned to Ethiopia with a hint of the same deranged sense of reality, mythic images with a brash of modernity, and art as a devotional object suggesting the perpetual communication of humankind with the gods. Into the bargain of the gods, one also witnesses the interlacing and merging of images and textures. These are the weaving compositions which Boghossian calls *kulffu*.

If he had had his way, Boghossian would have summoned the spirits the old fashioned way, i.e. the worshipper directly communing with the divine to mediate the cultural clash between the ‘West and the Rest,’ between what dominantly prevailed and what ought to be. This spirituality was his medium of consciousness in which history

can be probed beyond its materialistic dominion and into the spiritual dimension. Nevertheless, the dominant discourse on art often gives little or no attention to issues of spirituality. Although there are many occasions when artists have incorporated spirituality into their artistic expression, those occasions have not corresponded with a critical theory of the spiritual realm of the text. Instead, art history has given its voice of authority for artists like Boghossian who indulged in the fantasy of the spirit through such discursive avenues as ‘magical realism.’

While such modalities are useful in denoting the existence of spirituality in a form of art, they do not critically encourage the perception of spirit as an ontological sphere of influence. For instance, the uses of the supernatural in non-Western literature, from the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez to that of Salman Rushdie, is grouped together under the rubric of ‘magical realism.’ Nevertheless, critical analysis of the difference and the politics of identity, positioning, and representation, are tantamount in these works which cannot be simply described in terms of polarized opposites such as ‘reality versus fantasy.’ As Brenda Cooper in *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* has stated about the literatures of Ben Okri, Syl-Cheni Coker and Kojo Lang, it is the negotiation of “the middle space created by a cosmopolitan drive deriving from their marginal positioning, on one hand, and a desire to inscribe their writings in the African socio-political context, on the other.” (Cooper, 2003, p.32) Cooper has persuasively shown that through their use of devices like irony, parody, pastiche, paradox, the grotesque, riddles and mythical allusion, these writers have produced “complex, ambivalent works of art which depict life's many dimensions, seen and unseen, visible and invisible, rational and mysterious.” (ibid)

It is within this critical paradigm of a third space that desired to go beyond the visible limits of his global horizon that I want to introduce the ‘*debtora scrolls*’ and Boghossian’s fascination with these magical scrolls which he continued to work on

until his death. Many continue to copy these works from a purely aesthetic perspective without really comprehending the ambiguous third space that he was trying to position himself. It becomes the task of the critic therefore, to trace and discuss the different affect of the Orthodox Church on his works. The *debtera* of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is a learned person who completes the same studies as a priest and then continues with further education. Unlike the priests of the church, the *debtera* can neither celebrate mass nor take confession. He usually takes on the role of a teacher and performs the music and dance associated with church services. What is important about the *debtera* for Boghossian's works is his knowledge as an astrologer, scribe and fortune teller. He is very well versed on traditional healing plants and in many instances can invoke Satan to do good or evil by reciting mysterious Christian texts.

*Debteras* are particularly well known for their amulets in which a scroll of illuminated parchment of Christian and non-Christian text is scribed. People who are inflicted with illness wear these amulets around their neck to be treated from their malady and in some cases to protect them against bad spirits like the *zar*<sup>26</sup> and the *bouda*.<sup>27</sup> In cases where the amulets are not needed, the patient looks fixedly at the scroll and enters a healing trance. By looking intently at the scroll, the patient is penetrated and cured through his/ her eyes. Different amulets are also crafted for different illnesses.

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<sup>26</sup> Also performed in other Middle Eastern countries, the *zar* is thought to have originated in Ethiopia, and to have been brought to Egypt by Ethiopian slaves. The *zar* is a spirit that possesses a person and prompts the possessed in a trance-like state. No one is exempt from possession by these jinn; however, it is usually females who are affected. A *zar* performance will consist of the rolling of the head by the "possessed" dancer, either from side to side or around in circles. The *zar* has its own music and rhythm, which can differ from village to village.

<sup>27</sup> In Ethiopia, it is traditionally believed that every blacksmith is a wizard with the power to change into a hyena. These blacksmith hyenas are believed to rob graves at midnight and are referred to as *bouda*. *Boudas* are viewed with suspicion. The *bouda* are believed to nightly turn into a hyena and resume human shape at dawn. Many Ethiopian Christians characterize Ethiopian Jews as *boudas* accusing them as unearthing Christian corpses and consuming them. Ethiopian Jews had traditionally been blacksmiths hence their association with the *bouda*.

What intrigued Boghossian in these *debtera* scrolls was the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality that is rooted in the cultural and historical reality of his country. Moreover, it was a formal aesthetic of choice that best represented the intangible aspects of place and the religious naturalizing of the supernatural, as well as a distinct African art whose inspiration was the intuition of a world force. In *Art that Heals*, anthropologist Jacques Mercier (1997, p.79) described Ethiopian healing scrolls as “an opening into a number of currently essential questions that demand intercultural exchange.” He argued that these scrolls bring into light the interrelation of perception and aesthetics, of art and the body, that are typical characteristics of African aesthetics. According to Mercier, *debtera* talismans have been revealed supernaturally to Old Testament figures and representational painting “to have begun with John’s and Luke’s images of the Crucifixion and Mary.” (Mercier, 1997, p.83) It is said that *debtera* talismans had been revealed later than the birth of Christ and that images of cherubs had framed the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>28</sup>

The typical *debtera degemt* (talismanic prayer) starts with *Besme Ab Weweld Wemenfes Kedus* (In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) and continues on with names from the heavenly world, some demons alike, some unknown spirit name, with a final Christian name of the person to be healed. Girmay Kidane, in his book *Ye Debtera Asmat Doctor*, (1985) talked about the *degemt‘Mefteha Serah*, a particular preparation of medicinal art prepared to get rid of a specific evil by *Methategonch and Asmategnoch* (those who believe in spells) with the same preamble

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<sup>28</sup> The Ark of the Covenant was crucial to the success of Moses in the Exodus. It is said to be in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in the town of Axum. It is supposed to have disappeared during the reign of King Solomon more than 3,000 years ago. It was taken to Ethiopia by Menelik I, the son of Solomon’s union with the legendary Queen of Sheba, and has supposedly been in Ethiopia ever since. The legend says that since Ethiopia is the only nation which can produce living descendants of Solomon as heirs to his throne and dynasty (Emperor Haile Selassie was the 225th descendant of King Solomon, as well as being a member of Solomon's Tribe of Judah) the Ark has rightfully rested in Ethiopia all these centuries.

of *Besme Ab* and proceeds with names of angels, following with evil spirits closing with the Christian name of the healed.

In actual life, Boghossian also started his day by sprinkling the house with *Ye Mikael Tebel* (St. Michael's Holy Water) to ward off the evil, against the background music of Nina Simone or John Coltrane. During the course of the day, with the incense burning, he turned to the *jujus*, asking for forgiveness and blessing. His fate was predestined by the ancestors whether it was Mikael of the Orthodox Church or the West African juju. For him, they were one and the same, as invisible powers that are at a higher ambit guiding the physical. His was not a declaration of faith but of a secular concern for a fundamental respect to the ancestors, which affirmed the integrity of African civilizations, itself a product of converging experiences of history. He once refused to work in a studio that he rented when he was engaged in his work for the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington's *Wall of Representation* project, claiming that his assistant had started working in the studio before his initial communication with the *jujus*.

Hence, his life demonstrated the simple fact that he had largely reduced spiritual thought and practice to everyday practice, linking the supernatural with the natural and the mundane. He believed that these beings were to be found anywhere and everywhere. Therefore, he created an indigenous third space which ultimately tried to articulate the importance of cultural awareness through mythic dimensions and attempt to form a commonality with the culturally oppressed for a new conceptualization and a new ontology of their history.

This approach manifested in his strong connection with the spiritual powers of the ancestors as a metaphoric narrative of a European hierarchical stance and European vulnerabilities against the power of the African ancestral spirit, thus framing a narrative to urge the West that there is a higher power dynamic watching all the evils. His

images, although dense, colorful and tactile, highlight basic techniques of the *debtera* scrolls. What made these images especially intriguing was that they were mediations about Ethiopian and African identity that initiated its articulation in Paris in an antagonistic relationship to the dominant culture of the West, where one's images were represented and re-represented from the roundabout ways of 'Otherness.' His identity was defined not on the stable essence of the term but rather on its dynamic confrontation with the opposition with which it clashed and in some cases crossed, traded, and shared. In these images, his identity existed as something hoped for, but not something tenable in the present. Boghossian recognized the critical points and significant differences that constituted what he was, or rather since history had intervened in what he had become. He did not speak about one experience and one identity. He acknowledged the ruptures and discontinuities which constituted precisely his uniqueness. His identity was a matter of becoming as well as of being. He was part of the continuous play of history, culture and power but desired to be treated and represented with justice, simultaneously with the demand for recognition of difference.

He often used the original parchment *debtera* scrolls which he initially scraped and washed in order to remove the original work. Often, it was hard to totally eliminate the original image, and he was left with subtle images of the original work. It was on these subtle images that he juxtaposed his amazing creations. He contrasted the symbolism of the bird and the serpent on these parchments. These images that recur in many of the traditional Ethiopian paintings are also found in other African aesthetical perspectives. The serpent and the eagle embody many of Boghossian's works and narrate the collective interaction of man and nature. The general representation of the serpent constrained to the earth, and the eagle in spiritual flight, both symbolize the power of life. The serpent or snake is, by analogy, symbolic of energy itself, hence its ambivalence and multivalence. Boghossian talked about the serpent's multiplicity and

as a creature of the desert being a force of destruction, afflicting all those who have succeeded in crossing the Red Sea and leaving Egypt. For him, the serpent is connected with the temptations facing those who have overcome the limitations of matter and have entered into the realm of the spirit. Through these scrolls, Boghossian illustrated the Janus-face of Ethiopia's artistic heritage where the devotional and the magical fuse. Mercier (1997, p.79) concurred with this duality saying:

When the representational images on the scrolls are captioned, the inscriptions resemble those in religious paintings. 'images of Michael' they say or 'how our lord the demon to be silent'. Also as in religious paintings, among them the passages from the gospels describing Christ's healing miracles. It is unsurprising then, that scroll images and religious paintings are sometimes iconographically and stylistically identical, if angels are very present in a scroll, they are usually Phanuel, the expeller of demons who is usually little known in religious life.

Looking at Girmay Kidane's illumination in the *Mefetha Serah*, one can see the same cartography of lines and elaborate designs in Boghossian's visual language. *Mefteha Serah* is illuminated with eight images representing an intricate collection of networks and flowcharts illustrating the processes by which what is exterior becomes interior, and what is closed becomes open, spiraling in and out and vice versa, ultimately articulating the ambiguities of good and evil. The rectangular pictograph symbolizes a linear movement of the concept of boundaries from North to South and from East to West and the relationship between good and evil, marking its profound connection with time and place.



Figure 2.4, line images from a *debtera* scroll

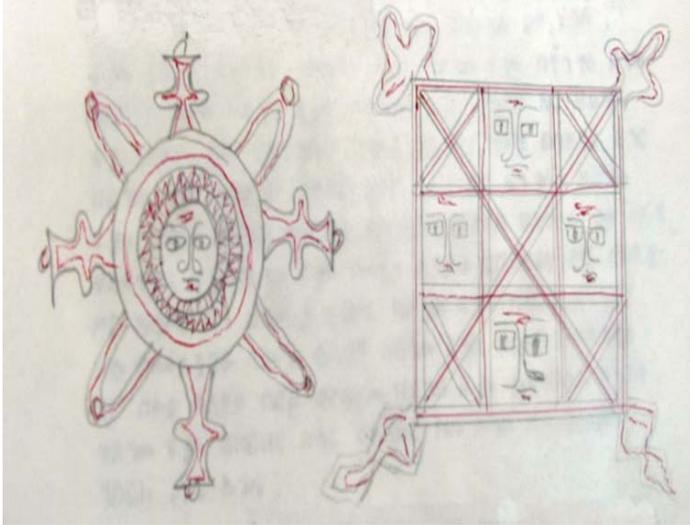


Figure 2.5 line image from a *debtera* scroll

The North, South, East and West intriguingly demonstrate the potential openings for evil to enter. Inside the rectangle, one sees the actual engagement of integration and disintegration, the evil interweaving its presence into the fabric and again dissolving. The *debteras* call it *yebret chical* (an iron wrench) that tries to lock but gets unlocked. Its conceptual underpinnings notwithstanding, the delicate weaving of the vine is a rich illustration that in spite of its own premise, renders an allusion of complex interlacing. Again, this plait stands to be a metaphor of evil and its dematerialization.

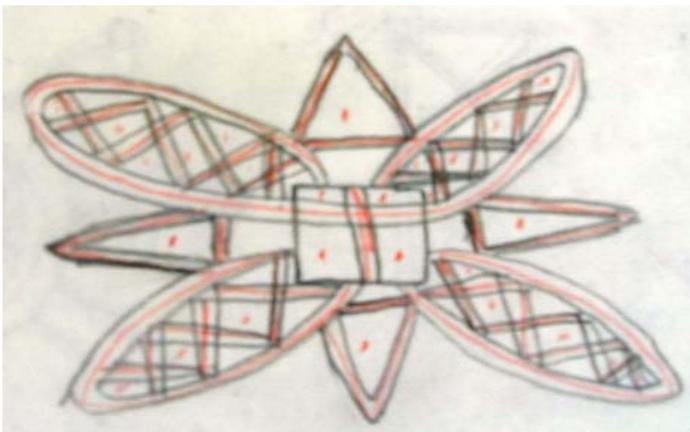


Figure 2.6 vine image from a *debtera* scroll

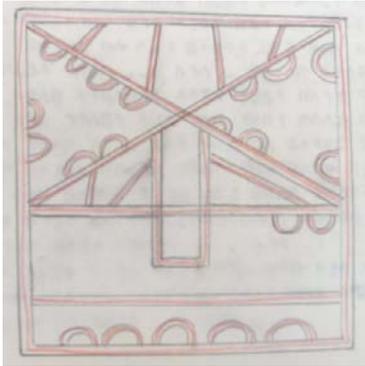


Figure 2.7 line image from a *debtera* scroll

Whether Boghossian understood the technical interpretations of these scrolls, I could not be sure. Nevertheless, he has closely followed the interlocking and disintegration of these lines where most of his works consist of lines with closed and open-ended spirals, to form an allegory for his socially conscious narratives. For the most part, his images not only narrate broad ideas about place and identity but also flesh out their lingering psychological effect through the struggle of the spirits, objects, and dematerialization, and between good and bad.

Describing Boghossian's important work, the *Forbidden Door*, (see Figure 2.8) Solomon Deressa (1997, p.14) said: "Eyes (evocatively Ethiopian in their paranoia) watch us from beyond the forbidden area." Perhaps the most important part of the image of the *debtera* talisman that also persists in other images of the Church is the iconography of the eye. "Ethiopian scroll images," said Mercier (1997, p.94), "immediately impress us in the West with their gazing eyes, they fit together in a pattern, and in such a way as to encourage a figurative interpretation of the pattern's ovals, we read them as eyes, these eyes always in pairs, are positioned symmetrically and obliquely in relation to the composition's vertical or horizontal axis." These eyes survey space. They watch over the image's viewer. They chase away demons, and to look at these eyes is also to be looked at. The eye is omnipresent in Ethiopian traditional painting where good persons are portrayed in full face with two eyes visible,

and evil people are shown in profile with one eye visible. The eyes in traditional paintings compel the viewer's gaze. The hagiographies for each saint reference the eye as, for instance, *lighting the entire world* in *Kristos Samra*.<sup>29</sup> In exploring the eye in Ethiopian Christian traditional painting, Messay Kebede (1999, p.217) has said: "The personages do not act; they are acted instead, as though their position and role were imparted to them through the hypnotized eyes. Nothing could better suggest the omnipotence of God than these vivid yet unobserving eyes."



Figure 2.8 Skunder (Alexander) Boghossian, *Forbidden Door*, 1973, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 44 1/2 in. Retrieved from Deressa, S. (1997, January-February). Skunder in Context. *Ethiopian Birr*.

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<sup>29</sup> Kristos Samra is one of the Ethiopian women saints who are portrayed in several hagiographies.

While the use of the eye in Boghossian's works derives from its Coptic repertoire, it also produces its own image without a necessary frame. The artist sees the world while being seen through the eyes in the painting. Boghossian is purposefully illusive in portrayals of the eye, and one is forced to engage in the way Mercier (1997, p.94) has described regarding the talisman images of the eye: "Any gaze that engages the gaze is forced to submit to it." Here, one could also mention Foucault's unprecedented reading of Diego Velazquez's painting, *Las Meninas*, in *The Order of Things*, between those who represent, those who are represented, and those who look:

From the eyes of the painter to what he is observing there runs a compelling line that we, the onlookers, have no power of evading: it runs through the real picture and emerges from its surface to join the place from which we see the painter observing us; this dotted line reaches to us ineluctably, and links us to the representation of the picture. In appearance, this locus is a simple one; a matter of pure reciprocity: we are looking at a picture in which the painter is in turn looking out at us. A mere confrontation, eyes catching one another's glance, direct looks superimposing themselves upon one another as they cross. And yet this slender line of reciprocal visibility embraces a whole complex network of uncertainties, exchanges, and feints. The painter is turning his eyes towards us only in so far as we happen to occupy the same position as his subject. We, the spectators are an additional factor. Though greeted by that gaze, we are also dismissed by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model itself. (Foucault, 1994, p.5)

*Forbidden Door* is a painting about being shut out of Ethiopia during Colonel Mengistu's reign. This painting is an in memoriam of Boghossian's friend Endale Haile-Selassie who died in Addis Ababa in 1972 under mysterious circumstances at the beginning of his career as a painter. The theme is about loss, and about it Deressa (1997, p.14) has said: "The eyes that from the inside keep the viewer under surveillance are in the windows to the left of the door that guards the forbidden interior." Indeed, Boghossian's usage of the eye is captivating in many of his images. One can see the

earlier version of this usage in the murals of the Hilton Hotel in Addis Ababa and the later versions in images like *Juju's Wedding* (1964).<sup>30</sup> (See Figure 2.9)



Figure 2.9 Skunder Boghossian. *Ju Ju's Wedding*, 1964, tempera and metallic paint on cut and torn cardboard, 21 1/8 x 20in. Blanchette Rockefeller Fund. Retrieved April 20, 2007 from: [http://www.moma.org/international/africa/popup\\_4.html](http://www.moma.org/international/africa/popup_4.html)

### ***The United States Years (1969-2003)***

Boghossian left for the United States in 1969 where he would again actively participate in the Civil Rights Movement. He was invited to become artist in residence at Atlanta University, as well as resident instructor in sculpting, painting, and African design at the Atlanta Center for Black Art. He later joined Howard University in 1972 and taught there until 2001 where he played a major role in bringing to Howard, as well as mentoring, second generation Ethiopian artists like Tesfaye Tessema. Boghossian joined Howard at the height of the Black Power Movement and in the midst of a period

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<sup>30</sup> See Appendix for description.

of cultural and political activism. At Howard, Boghossian continued to show through his works what he had been passionately involved in both Paris and Ethiopia, reviving respect for a subjugated black African race. Contemporary African Art curator and historian, Salah Hassan (1995, p.48) said:

Skunder's impact goes beyond the modern African art movement to artists of African descent in the African diaspora. Arriving in the United States in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, Skunder witnessed the rise of the Black Power Movement. The emergence of liberation and decolonization movements in Africa during the 1950s and 1960s became a tremendous source of inspiration and solidarity among artists of African descent. The search for a new vocabulary rooted in the African experience, which accompanied these movements, has its share of cross influences among African American artists. Skunder has been an integral part of this.

Boghossian continued to widely exhibit his works in the United States during the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. In his last solo exhibition at the Studio Museum in New York in June, 1972, Rosalind Jeffries, the then curator of The Studio Museum of Harlem stated that Boghossian had,

...become engaged in explorations, a synthesis of traditional Africa, versus modernity; and also of East versus West. The energy of his canvases describes African philosophy, mythology, cosmology, African symbolism raising questions as to our value system, man's humanity to man, man's humanity to the universe; questions as to the relationship of American stars and use punctuation or add words to make this clearer icon, stripes "thee Eagle" to the traditional symbol used from the ancient times throughout the continent of Africa. There is an implied indication perhaps as to the continuity of African cultures, and a unity of blacks throughout the world. (Jeffries, 1972)

Noteworthy of his works during this period was his experimentation on bark cloth. Bark cloths are frequently used for burial in East African communities. The cloths are buried in mud for an extended period of time to get durability and strength so as to hold one's remains. Bark cloth is a fragile material, but Skunder sculpted figures on these

cloths so meticulously that once it was finished, each climb up was followed by a slope down and each curve that ran left gave way to a curve that ran right. (*Time Cycle III*)<sup>31</sup>

(See Figure 2.10)



Figure 2.10 Skunder (Alexander) Boghossian, *Time Cycle III*, 1981, embossed bark cloth, 48 x 48 in. Harn Museum of Art, Florida. Retrieved June 15, 2009 from: <http://www.nmafa.si.edu/exhibits/passages/boghossian-time.html>

It is ironic to say that the symbols of spirits that Boghossian recurrently used throughout his career, and which he valorized to be the highest emblems of black identity, also became the source for his deep engagement with substance abuse. He often talked about Christian Lattier, the Ivorian sculptor (1925-1978) who created extraordinary string and wire constructions that recall both African fiber art and Christian religious iconography. Lattier was in Paris the same time Boghossian was. Boghossian said that Lattier attached supernatural attributes to all the objects he created and that Lattier's conviction of the existence of unseen beings with magical powers created a paradox later in his life. Lattier, according to Boghossian, (personal communication, 1997-2003) slowly developed a somber paranoia in the powers of these unseen beings.

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<sup>31</sup> See Appendix for description.

Perhaps, it is no more coincidence that Boghossian's life shared the same predicament. One could say that Boghossian also had a complicated relationship with the spirits after his return to the United States; at times they were in harmony with him, and at other times he was deeply tortured by their presence. He got disturbed by the spirits when justice failed and when he clearly saw the marginal perception of what he relentlessly tried to narrate. He saw the power of the spirits, but at the same time their shadowy presence that at times just remained shadows. He immersed himself even more in the mystery of the *debtara* talisman and its depiction of spells and conjurations that he had experimented on while he was in Addis Ababa. Hence, his later works, especially the ones made in the United States, mediated a voice of sanity and passion as well as an intonation of unrest and turmoil.

One could never talk about Boghossian without talking about his alcoholic quandary that haunted a major part of his life, particularly after his return to the United States. He said he drank because he was in discord with the spirits. The spirits and their invisible power defined the auspices of time and place for him. The desires, possibilities, and deferred dreams became all too visible in his drinking days. The images that he created right after his agonizing drinking bouts, however, were fantastic visual languages of struggle between the demon and the seraph, between night and day, and between Armageddon and dawn.

Most of his works from during his drinking stretches are incredible portrayals of conflict and virtual carnage. The images are remarkably replete, so richly tactile, and so densely layered. They evoke a sense of accord and discord with images appearing and dissolving. He said that these images were plausible accounts of what the events of his alcohol withdrawal depicted. (Boghossian, personal communication, 1997-2003) They portrayed the struggle with the devil that came in the form of an evil spirit that encouraged him to drink, and the spirit of the good that resisted, taking him out of his

binge. Skunder was not an avid reader, but Kafka's works was an exception. For Boghossian, Kafka and Federico Fellini, the Italian film maker, aestheticized the imagination, treating the imagination as a seat of all experiment. Kafka's novels that expressed the alienation of 20<sup>th</sup> Century man and Fellini's wildly imaginative, richly textured blurred juxtapositions of memory, fantasy and reality fascinated Boghossian. The images and the extreme characters that populate Fellini's works seem to resonate in Boghossian's mind with unexpected familiarity. I have watched Boghossian watch Fellini's *Eight and a Half Weeks* many times and each time the images have struck a deeper chord with a new laughter, a new interpretation, and a new familiarity. In Fellini, he saw a divine that was playful and remote, and in Kafka he saw the nightmares of dehumanization and a divine who could be punishing. The invisibility of the unknown spirits invites speculation. Just like Kafka and Fellini who imagined a speculative and an illusory form of reality and who consequently experimented in the spatial disorientation of the human paradox, Boghossian also wildly speculated the threshold between a dematerialized and a historicized body.

Considering that he was one of the African avant-garde artists who preserved the contextual communication of what it is to be African, Boghossian did not get his due place in art history. Art history has long maintained a separation between 'native' work by so called outsider artists and work whose styles are savvy, that places artists as honored guests of the art world rather than bona fide stars. Boghossian was an honored guest of the art world when he deserved to be a bona fide star. He had been packaged as an artist of the 1960s and 1970s who played with African motifs with no relevance to present art narratives. This had befuddled him for most of his life contributing to his tumultuous encounter with substance abuse.

He was categorized by Western critics and historians, as a byproduct of the anti-colonial cultural movements. This was a fundamental misunderstanding of an

arbitrarily imposed perspective by those who did not comprehend his work although he continued to produce magnificent images until his death in 2003. Unfortunately, he was never able to win the interest of the major Western art platforms in exhibiting his later works. The art establishment always presented his earlier works and did so alongside artists of the 1960s political movements. If he was exhibited at all in a context that was outside the narrative of the independence and Civil Rights Movement, it was with other Ethiopian artists in a context that neglected his divergent experiences, and in exhibitions that packaged artists in marketable and vogue discursive constructs of notions such as ‘diaspora’ and ‘exile.’

For instance, in a 2003 exhibition titled *Ethiopian Passages: Dialogues in the Diaspora* at the Museum of African Art in Washington, the deviating and rich experience of Skunder Boghossian was placed in tangent with that of Julie Mehretu and eight other Ethiopian artists, under an unrestrained terrain of diaspora as the focus of inquiry and with plausible currencies of the time such as ‘exile’ and ‘trauma.’ In the opening section of the catalogue, under the title of *Poetics of Diaspora*, the curator of the exhibition, Elizabeth Harney, cited Salmon Rushdie from the essay entitled *Imaginary Homelands* and stated that this “famous exile’s ruminations upon one of the defining features of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the condition of migrancy—set the frame for fruitful investigation of the linkages between diasporic experience and the making of visual arts. In an increasingly mobile society, contemporary artists who have engaged with these now common experiences help us to understand better the contours of diaspora and exile.” (Harney, 2003, p.19) Right from the beginning, Harney interchanged notions of ‘diaspora’ and ‘exile’ and implied the construction of an underpinned ambiguous ideology of ‘exile’ in the setting of the exhibition. This exhibition typified a discursive process of diaspora formation that has become increasingly problematic, where multiple manifestations of diaspora have become

elusive from experiences of difference and ‘Otherness,’ and where the discourse of one-dimensionality has created the idea of an ‘authentic’ experience.

While Skunder Boghossian, Ethiopia’s avant-garde modernist, left his homeland in 1969 following his African American wife to the United States. Julie Mehretu, who comes from a mixed background of Ethiopian and American parentage, left her country at an early age to be one of the successful female artists of the decade in the West. While Skunder Boghossain started his artistic career by challenging the concept of the ‘primitive’ in Paris with the likes of Wilfredo Lam, as counter discourse of European modernism, Mehretu, born in 1970, started her career in the early 1990s to be one of the leading artists of the West in the year 2000. The specific history and experience of these two artists should recognize the radical difference between the essence of diaspora and of the way identities have been constituted in the experience of diaspora.

It is ironic that although Boghossian lived in the United States for over thirty years, he was never seen as a ‘diaspora’ artist until this exhibition and was never able to enter the exhibition halls of major art platforms that have in the last decade indulged in notions of ‘diaspora’ when exhibiting contemporary African art. For these venues, Skunder Boghossian did not fit the discursive space of ‘diaspora’ as he was considered part of a culture of resistance which the art world was no longer interested in, however he continued to narrate different social variations of diasporic consciousness until his death. This brings into investigation ways in which our understanding of the concept of ‘diaspora’ has evolved from the early theories of independence and liberation movements to the current age, where ‘diaspora’ identity continues to be constructed under ambiguous notions of ‘exile,’ ‘displacement,’ and ‘trauma,’ frameworks that should be critically evaluated in the current age.

The term ‘diaspora’ has become a contentious term in the past decade where scholars like Rasheed Araeen and Brent Edwards have started to critically interrogate

the genealogy of the term itself. “A return to the intellectual history of the term itself,” said Brent Edwards (2001, p.47), “is necessary because it reminds us that diaspora is introduced in large part to account for difference among African derived populations.” It could indeed be argued that the discourse of ‘diaspora’ that started with the artists of the ‘40s, 50s and 60s’ has today taken a new articulation. Stuart Hall argued that once identification is secured, it does not eradicate difference and its suggestion of a total merger creates what he calls “a fantasy of incorporation.” (Hall, 1996, p.4) “Art as a specific formation of culture,” said Rasheed Araeen (2000, p.8), “has its own structural problem, and to ignore this problem in favor of representing the oppressed would lead us into a sentimental solidarity.” This ‘sentimental solidarity’ homogenized the two artists’ different patterns of migratory experience in order to fit them into a contentious paradigm of ‘diaspora’ discourse. While I do not believe that neither Skunder Boghossian nor Julie Mehretu had escaped ‘mayhem,’ ‘famine,’ ‘poverty’ or lived in ‘exile’ in the U.S as the exhibition portrayed them to be, the discursive notion of the only exhibition that portrayed Skunder Boghossian as a ‘diaspora’ artist presented him as such an artist who had escaped all these ills, in such a way that de contextualized his experience of ‘diaspora.’

Boghossian’s span of experience should have defied any form of fixity to a certain referential orientation, but nevertheless his work fell prey to the canon that legitimated certain expressions of art and archived the rest in works fitting the rubric of anti-colonialism. Although his works are undeniably resonant with our current circumstance, in one crucial aspect they seem alien to us now. He was part of a culture of resistance in the 1960s and continued to narrate social variations until his death. Nevertheless, resistance and struggle sounded anachronistic, something almost never heard in conversations about art and culture; no matter how engaged the participants in

an otherwise comparable moment. His way of silencing this reflection was alcohol, the means by which anguish and conflict were temporarily overcome.

In a review of the exhibition *Trans-Atlantic Dialogue: Contemporary Art in and Out of Africa*, New York Times reviewer Holland Cotter (2000) referred to Boghossian's painting as "decorative" when he was describing its affinities to the work of Afri-Cobra artist Jeff Donaldson. He nevertheless referred to Jean Michel Basquiat and Ouattara Watts, two very popular artists in the art market, as "the most dynamic paintings by far in a compact room of paintings." (Cotter, 2000) Despite its varied visual language and its historical and political particularity, Boghossian's work was again packaged in a discourse that de-contextualizes background and perspective.

At issue here is the absence of the political and social factors of this particular work of Skunder Boghossian that explores and addresses the link between African and African American art that resonated at a particular juncture of liberation history. Afri-Cobra artists came together in 1968 to found a movement of black visual art that they premised would have innate and intrinsic components which are characteristic of being black. This movement was first initiated by Jeff Donaldson, Boghossian's colleague and friend at Howard University. It is said that Boghossian's works have greatly influenced the works of the Afri-Cobra artists in their visual expression of Black Nationalism and Liberation. It is unfortunate that as recently as August 2000, the critical aspects for analysis of the evolution of African modernism, which artists like Boghossian originally brought to light, is still being marginalized. Instead, the familiar and overly exhibited works of trendy artists such as Basquiat and Outarra dominates the critics' praises.

Skunder Boghossian left a huge impact on Ethiopian modernism where artists still articulate various variations of his work. He explored new possibilities in articulating Ethiopian modernism. As I said earlier, while he was part of the continuous

play of history, culture, and power, he also struggled vehemently to be treated and represented with justice, simultaneously with the demand for recognition of difference.

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## Chapter 3

### **Between the Visual and the Text: Ethiopian Modernity and Modernism an Alternative Reading**

I have discussed the role of *Berhanena Selam* when framing the beginning articulation of Ethiopian modernity. This chapter explores the role of literature in the representation of Ethiopian modernity of which *Berhanena Selam*, a weekly newspaper published by early modernist intellectuals like Deresse Amante, was the vanguard.<sup>32</sup> It can be said that it was the first paper to have elucidated modern intellectual thought and a good preamble to investigating and historicizing intellectual thought of modern Ethiopian history. Chapter One discussed the paper's cautious and tentative engagement with the 'modern' as it probed a variety of cultural and social issues. The chapter explored the paper's official rhetoric of 'modern nation building' as a strategy and its experimentation on a strand of thinking that commented extensively on tradition and modernity as two categories that can interact beneficially. Despite the grim political context of imperial power and pageantry that characterized the complex nature of early Ethiopian modernity, the newspaper exemplified early literatures that found science, rationality, and traditional culture comparable. *Berhanena Selam* was hence a reflection of early literatures that characterized the nature of Ethiopian modernity, where monarchy and modernity were not seen as contradictory or exclusive but functioned dialogically.

For instance, in a section entitled *Seletane* (civilization), *Berhanena Selam* commented on the radical revisions of the Ottoman Turkish state system under Mustafa Kemal Pasha, better known as Atatürk, applauding his effort to abandon the sacred law

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<sup>32</sup> Amante was a self educated intellectual and was a contributor to *Berhanena Selam*. He was as well an entrepreneur and was also Director in the Ministry of Agriculture. He went into exile to the Sudan during the Italian occupation.

of Islam in favor of the Swiss civil code. It cited the importance of Turkish religious schools and institutes that had been closed in order to emphasize secular education. It nevertheless fell short on discussions of Atatürk's revolutionary institutions that replaced an imperial culture with a national public culture and that propagated new national norms that would take the place of old imperial norms.

When discussing these early intellectuals who wrote on *Berhanena Selam*, such as Deressa Amante, Yonas Admassu (2007, p.3) said that "as far as they were concerned whatever was to result from the meeting (and mating) of tradition and modernity had to be an amalgam in which traces of the past would not be obliterated or the influence of the modern present would not be rejected out of hand." It was with later modernists like Dagnachew Worku and Bealu Girma that literature played a very important role in the history of the nation's social and intellectual movements, when writers articulated the variegated voices of history. These later modernists mapped the social and discursive conditions of Western modernity without a narrative of its ambivalent relationship to the non-West. Admassu (2007, p.4) said that "skeptical, disillusioned, angry and outright rebellious," these later modernists created a space of contestation in the literary corpus.

Perhaps it is important to elaborate what I mean by literary modernists and literary modernism before gratifying in the works of literary artists that I have categorized as literary modernists in a genre of work I call literary modernism. I clarified what I call Ethiopian modernity and modernism in the introduction chapter; modernity as a historical, cultural and political construct of the period in inquiry, and modernism as the historical and cultural condition that made this possible. To that process, I have triangulated Ethiopian modernism and modernity into three important historical coordinates. The first wave intellectuals were products of the shock of the Italian invasion. They were disillusioned by the mighty Empire in its catastrophic

failure to defeat the Italians. These intellectuals played an important antecedent to later radical intellectual thought which emerged during the fall of global colonialism. These first wave intellectuals were also direct descendants of the *Berhanena Selam* writers. Some had moderate Western education while most were fully educated in the West. As discussed in Chapter One, the disenchantment of the first wave intellectuals had pressed the Emperor to engage in various strategies that attempted to salvage his image. I believe that it was the residue of these intellectuals' cynicism that gave birth to the tumultuous modern history of Ethiopia that followed. This chapter explores the span of the second coordinate. Concentrating on the period roughly from 1950 until the revolution of 1974, modernism is used to describe trends in art, writing, criticism, and philosophy that had a powerful influence on the development and experience of this period, and modernity as a momentous shift in attitude, historical processes and technological changes that occurred during this period.

These writer intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s who fundamentally changed the course of Ethiopian modern history were direct products of Haile Selassie's education policy. They were mostly Western educated with direct sponsorship by the State. They returned to Ethiopia determined to modernize their country and free it from the shackles of poverty and ignorance. The only problem was their uncritical evaluation of notions of modernity. What type of modernity should Ethiopia follow? Their answer to this question was ambiguous and tentative and one that this chapter attempts to investigate. With an urgency to define the realm of the critical and ethical, these writers unequivocally differed from earlier writers of *Berhanena Selam* and the first wave intellectuals after *Berhanena Selam* in their deconstructionist approach to that legacy for a more elaborate but ambiguous analysis of contemporary Ethiopian experience. They defied imperial rule to indict social inequalities. They produced texts informed by dissent and emphasized the urgency of a socio-political renaissance.

They came in the 50s and 60s. For Africa, it was a time of transition from colonial rule, and the nature and value of modernity and its alternatives revolved around discourses that attempted to locate the nuances behind the emergence of a localized modernism. The question of decolonization's power and agency, which changed not only the African geo-political landscapes but also the politics of culture and identity, was key to the reconfiguration of an alternative African modernity. How and why this movement affected Ethiopian intellectuals will be discussed later in the text.

“The Ethiopia that this new breed of writers knew,” said Yonas Admassu (2007, p.4), was not the Ethiopia of legend that land of milk and honey of which countless writers including Samuel Johnson had written about.” If anything, Admassu said (ibid) “it was a dismal reality punctured all over with poverty, disease, ignorance, oppression and exploitation. It needs no overstating that this generation's belief was that things must change, and in quite a radical way.” However urgently these writers felt the need for socio-political change, they fell short from articulating an alternative ideology to the ruling class. They were caught in a dilemma that tended to inhibit any simple expression for projected change. A modernism that critiqued but failed to re-contextualize and redefine alternative conceptions particularly shaped the development of the Ethiopian Student Movement,<sup>33</sup> a movement which many of these writers were

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<sup>33</sup> The Ethiopian Student Movement started out in 1960 when university students organized in support of the 1960 failed coup against Emperor Haile Selassie. Ethiopian students' organizations like the University Students Union in Addis Ababa (USUAA), Ethiopian Students World Wide Federation and the Ethiopian Student Union in North America (ESUNA) evolved after this incident. By the late 1960s these organizations coordinated and emerged as Marxist opposition. They advocated a violent revolutionary struggle to establish a people's government. Their paper *Struggle* called for an uprising against the Imperial regime. The Ethiopian Student Movement played an important role in the uprising of 1974 and in the overthrowing of Emperor Haile-Selassie I. This movement also contributed to the coming of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON) who played key roles in the revolution. The EPRP participated in guerilla fighting against the Derg (the military junta) that had usurped power after the uprising of 1974. MEISON allied initially with the military junta but later had a falling out. The confrontation of the military junta against the EPRP resulted in the Red Terror of 1979 that slaughtered many young revolutionaries.

part of and one that played a crucial role in the formation of the country's intellectual and social movements.

Literature as a movement that grouped writers whose works have similar subject matter, writing style or thought as well as expressions of an essential aesthetic practice has rarely been conceptualized by Ethiopian literary intellectuals. Indeed, the history of European literary modernism is represented by, among others, Ezra Pound and T.S. Elliot, and reflects the twentieth century's diaspora and displacement, the construction and reconstruction of national cultures and alliances, and perspective on modernism that is as philosophically astute as it is politically engaged. However, literary movements are essentially artificial constructs that cannot be precisely delineated. Just like any other modernist movements, literary movements are also determined by their historical period and adherents. When I talk about Ethiopian literary modernism, I am therefore looking at Ethiopian literature within the social and political formation of Ethiopian identity that was inspired to this particular period's concepts of modernity with profound shift in sensibilities that appeared rooted in a time period. For instance, Ethiopian literature during the period of this inquiry, expressed the assertion of the self, and the power of the individual, as well as the dilemmas and perplexities of the modern intellectual.

My purpose in this chapter is to hence give historical meaning to modern Ethiopian art across boundaries of genre. I will focus on the literary modernists of the 1950s and 1960s and argue that the discourse that shaped the ambivalent construction of Ethiopian literary modernism during these two decades, also found its ultimate expression in visual art. I believe that just as the literature did, visual modernism both ambiguously reinforced and questioned the making and shaping of an alternative Ethiopian modernity. I think that this will open a larger perspective in which to

understand Ethiopian visual modernism, particularly where literature of Ethiopian modern art history and the measure of its complexity is non-existent.

While some writings have been done on Ethiopian modern literature, the paralleling of literature into the visual art had never been constructed. I argue that the only way to construct a narrative of Ethiopian modern art history is to investigate these literatures that I believe informed the scholarship of modern Ethiopian art history. Nearly all visual artists of that period were closely acquainted with the writers of the period. I argue that this relationship served in forming a collective image of the visual and the literary intellectual and that their critical consensus played a crucial role in shaping Ethiopian modernity.

### ***Ethiopian Literature in the 1950s and 1960s***

As said above, the genre of Ethiopian literature written in the 1950s and 1960s was radically different from its predecessor. Unlike earlier writers who believed in the compatibility between tradition and modernity and who believed that intertwining modernity with traditional values and practices quells modernity's uncertain quest, these new group of writers concentrated on subverting the dominant ideological structures of society. These writers came when imperialism and colonialism were under heavy fire by young African intellectuals who were deeply disturbed by the civilizing and enlightening mission that was usually assumed by Westerners. In their urge for an immediate social change that was stimulated by the independence movements, this new group of writers also challenged Emperor Haile Selassie's rhetoric of 'official nationalism' where Ethiopian sovereignty was paradoxically reduced to the imperial ideology of the State and the imperial institutionalization of Ethiopian nationalism. Although there were many writers of such a genre during this time, I focus on three

seminal works, Dagnachew Worku's *Adefres*, Bealu Grima's *KeAdmas Bashager*, and Yohannes Admassu's<sup>34</sup> *Esti Teteyeku*.

Dagnachew Worku's *Adefres* is probably the most deconstructionist novel that exemplifies the Ethiopian version of this radical opposition of young African intellectuals of the time. For Worku, modernity was a general project of democratization, liberalization, secularization, and humanization. Forging modernity appropriate for Ethiopia within these paradigms and reconstructing the Ethiopian reality nevertheless becomes a rhetorical discourse and a utopian dream in Worku's *Adefres*. The text unveils that subversion against the conservative supremacy of the status quo and the authority structures that maintain it cannot be overcome only by modernity's sheer instrumental rationality. The main character of the book is Adefres who applauds the images and discourses of European modernity while at the same time critiquing it. At times, Adefres doubts the tenuous but essential link to rationality and at others he articulates rationalizing as a basic strategy of progress. This tension, isolation and alienation of the modern intellectual build throughout the text. At issue is hence the intellectual's failure to understand and transform the Ethiopian reality.

The word *Adefres* means to 'disturb' or 'upset' the order of things. Adefres initially considers himself as progressive and a modernizer full of contempt for tradition. It is later in the novel that he finds himself disillusioned and unable to understand the complexities of modernity. He is a student of the University College of Addis Ababa who never left the city until he was assigned by the University to go to Debre Sina<sup>35</sup> to conduct the National Service, a teaching service in the countryside that was required of students. It is in Debre Sina that Adefres brings his modern education and its epistemic contradiction with traditional values and beliefs. It is there that

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<sup>34</sup> Yohannes Admassu is the author of *Este Teteyeku* and brother of Yonas Admassu who is referenced early in this text.

<sup>35</sup> Debre Sina is 130 km (81 miles) northeast of Addis Ababa in the highland region known as Menz.

Adefres fails to realize that modernity's marginal and fragmented subjects were not mutually constitutive but presented complexities of history. While his initial fiery dialogues with the people of Debre Sina challenge established frames, it fails to negotiate the divide between European modernity and its relationship to race, people, culture, religion, and history of the non-Western world.

Adefres eloquently questions the epistemological foundation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the church's various saint days. Followers of the Orthodox Church sit idle on the different days of the saints. "Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday---- Lideta ---Raguel---Aba Goba----Beata-----Yohannes Wolde Negodgwad---Abuye Tsadiqu----- Yesus Kristus----Selassie---Arbaetu Ensesa---Thomas Semaet---Meskele Yesus---Kidist Hannah---Kedus Michael---Egziabher Ab---Abune Aregawi----Life through these days just passes by." (Worku, 1955, p.10) He continues to state other holidays, the festivities that goes along with these holidays, the value system around food during these holidays and how life is wasted in a series of concentric circles around frivolous cultural ethos.

The novel is largely dialogic between the people of Debre Sina and Adefres. At the heart of the dialog is the contradictory interpretation of two primary ideas, that of Adefres who is the modernizer and that of the locals who have an investment in their fully functional local institutions. Adefres consistently evokes the concept of 'consciousness' and 'individuality' which he thinks traditional beliefs are without. Literary critic Tewodros Gebre has said:

Adefers shows the conflict between the educated and the illiterate, between modernity and tradition, individuality and consciousness of the modern youth's approach to knowledge. For the youth, that was an expression of the modern whether he or she knew the real meaning of modernity. On the other hand, the traditionalist does not want to listen to these adjectives. He or she has their own way of understanding

consciousness and individuality. Hence, both groups did not listen to each other neither did they understand each other. (Gebre, 2006, p.89)

Earlier in the novel, Adefres conveys a single, reliable, consistent and coherent message that his deconstructionist approach to traditional values seeks not only to invert the hierarchy, but also to explode the values and order implied by the traditional system. He preaches to the people of Debre Sina on the social reasons and motives behind his logic of progress, only to find out that locals instead supported the assumption enshrined in traditional philosophies. When he says *Wuhan kemenchu negern kesru* the locals correct him by saying *neger keseru wuha keteru*. He gets agitated when locals respond to his queries because he thinks that the response he got is backwards, unprogressive and downright ignorant. He says: *Denkoro nachew weym aygebachew...ene sele gebrena sawera enesu yemiyawerut seleBerutatyet new.*<sup>36</sup>

Adefres initially provided an original and at times persuasive debunking of tradition by attempting to portray its banality. Values and beliefs were seen as patriarchal, monotheistic and colonizing. It is with later evocative chapters that Adefres becomes ambivalent and oscillated between embracing European modernity's tenets on the one hand while rejecting it on the other. "Writers of the time like Dagnachew," said Tewodros Gebre (2006, p.89), "initially believed in their generation's mission to galvanize modernity although later on it seems like they got disillusioned and were wary of the generation's radicalization, a radicalization that came without an alternative reading of history and culture."

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<sup>36</sup> Ethiopians regularly speak in metaphors and satire. *Wuhan kemenchu negern kesru* means 'one should source water from its stream' and 'one should deliberate on things by knowing the root of the thing.' The locals respond by saying, *neger keseru wuha keteru* which means 'indeed one should deliberate on matters by investigating the matter to its root' but also 'while one should source water from its stream, one should also know a good stream.' Adefres' response of *denkoro nachew weym aygebachew ene sele gebrena sawera yemiyawut sele burutatyet new* means 'these people are ignorant' or 'they just do not understand, when I talk about farming they are talking to me about Mary.'

Adefres also represented a new left that had emerged through student activism that believed in a Marxist-Leninist materialist conception of modernity. However, this new activism embraced two levels of narratives in the project of modernity. On the one hand, it embraced a universal rationality that privileged European culture, and on the other it propagated an essentialized version of a Marxian method of social analysis which failed to include a comprehensive materialist theory of history and society and an understanding of modern industrial capitalism and Marxian theories of culture and the State.

In discussing historicism as a 'transition narrative,' Dipesh Chakrabarty has urged us to rethink the limitation of European social and political thought in understanding modernity in non-European contexts. Criticizing historicism that leaves us with a narrow vision of the 'political,' Chakrabarty has asserted that the categories of European social and political thought are inadequate for an analysis of modernity outside of Europe. Discussing Marxist historicity, Chakrabarty (in Hassan & Dadi, 2001, p.181) stated that:

Marx's methodological/epistemological statements have not always successfully resisted historicist readings. There has always remained enough ambiguity in these statements to make possible the emergence of Marxist historical narratives. These narratives turn around the theme of historical transition. Most modern third world histories are written within problematic posed by this transition narrative, of which the overriding (if often implicit) themes are those of development, modernization and capitalism.

Indeed, Chakrabarty's critique of historicism and discussion of an alternative approach for rethinking history and human agency should have replaced the unilinear, teleological understanding of Marxist history that the Ethiopian intellectual tried to enforce. Although a non-objectivist version of Marxist doctrine dominated later activism, the revolutionary class struggle had lost much of its critical edge in the hands

of the first generation so called Marxist student activists of which Adefres was.<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that in the 1960s, Marxism as a philosophy had provided third world societies like Ethiopia under its sway with a moral order and a set of values that helped people to orient themselves. In Ethiopia, the paradoxical metaphors of the experience of the intellectual subject within this dynamic of Marxist-Leninist thought not only failed from questioning the Ethiopian present but also did not perform, negotiate, or challenge the plurality of Marxism in various contexts, not only by situating local knowledge but also by being aware of the multi directional flows of Marxist Leninist ideas at the global level.

Adefres' ambivalence in later chapters of the book shows this dilemma when the people of Debre Sina refuse to listen to his rhetoric of modernity. His brutal intrusion to annihilate local experiences forecloses the possibility of bringing about change and in the process lay bare the flawed and fragile conception of his totalizing ideology of what Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls "the production of locality and locality as producing." The backlash that he encounters from local identities disillusion him and he is faced with a fundamental re-thinking of the notion of the 'modern.'

The novel ends with Adefres' ironic death in a riot of the Ethiopian Student Movement. It is ambiguous as to what exactly causes his death. The author implies that a stone thrown by one of the rioters hits his head, although Adefres himself is one of the rioters. The reader is left with a sense of a generation's confusion in its quest for modernity. The generation was neither part of the idealized self-understanding of bourgeois modernity of which Dilip Gaonkar (1999, p.2) said is the "growth of scientific consciousness, the development of a secular outlook, the doctrine of progress,

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<sup>37</sup> The first generation Marxist students organized in 1960 right after the attempted coup against Emperor Haile Selassie. As explained in the footnote of the Ethiopian Student Movement, it was later in the trajectory of the movement that the Marxist tendency matured. It was later in the movement that students started to study Marxism and write about revolutionary theories. It was not until 1976 when students started to debate about different interpretations of Marxism.

the primacy of instrumental rationality, the fact value split, individualistic understanding of the self, contractualist understanding of society, and so on,” nor were they part of what Gaonkar, again, referred to as ‘cultural modernity.’ “Cultural modernity,” said Gaonkar (1999 p.3), “was the cultivation and the care of the self. Self-exploration and self-realization were its primary concern. In this quest for the self, a high premium was placed on spontaneous expression, authentic experience, and unfettered gratification of one’s creative and carnal urges. Imagination was an ally, and reason was an obstacle.”

Adefres’ ironic death symbolizes the daunting challenge of Ethiopian literary humanists of the 1950s and 1960s. They lacked critical thought on how to transcend the dichotomy of Western modernity both in its Marxian and Euro-capitalist version, and to conceptualize local experiences and local contribution to the realization of a localized version of modernity. Donald Donham (1999, p.125) has commented on these early intellectuals:

The discrepancy between the growing desire for aspects of modern culture and the persistence of many old customs and problems has generated much impatience, anxiety and ennui among the modern educated. Their sense of inadequacy vis-à-vis western metropolitan standards is no less painful for having escaped a long heritage of colonial domination, and combined with a sense of failure to move rapidly toward aspired goals has created in many of the modern-educated marked self destructive tendencies. Insofar as their destructiveness has not turned inward it has been projected outward against other elements inside Ethiopia and without. One of these targets is the uneducated mass of the people who, are so often regarded as backward that the only way one can bring progress in them is through coercion and authoritarian manipulation.

Beaalu Girma’s *KeAdmas Bashager*, which means ‘Beyond the Horizon,’ talks about the modern man’s quest for individuality and the relevancy of individual consciousness for collective social change. The central theme of Beaalu Girma’s novel is a review of

both the traditional notion of the ‘self’ and a modern conception of ‘self’ that is standing on its own, and its intricate relations to society and culture in the discourse of Ethiopian modernity. The novel’s presentation of this paradox of the ‘self’ portrays the dislocating effects of Western modernity on the modern Ethiopian subject. The novel’s central character is Abera who is educated in the United States and who is bereft of a clear sense of direction or coherent sense of purpose. He, whose pleasure of desire is free of any moralistic undertones, is restless. He is a womanizer who frequently changes women, and who frequently changes jobs, and according to his brother Ato Abate, is impatient and impulsive. Abera tells Ato Abate that patience is like “still water that rots and reeks.” (Girma, 1961, p.44)

An important character in the book is Abera’s friend Hailemariam. In Hailemariam, one can see the dichotomy of Western individuality versus local interpretations of community. Hailemariam is obsessed with finding the ‘self’, a ‘self’ that is in continual self definition and that vacillates between romantic individualism and revolutionary collectivism. Nevertheless, for Hailemariam, the individual will and the collective obligation come together only when collectivism serves as a rallying call for national salvation in the face of authoritarian rule. His conversations always revolve around the interpretation of the autonomous individual, an exasperating concept for Abera’s traditionalist brother who finds this philosophy of the autonomous individual as a non-viable ideal. In a conversation between Ato Abate and Hailemariam that revolves around Abera’s impulsiveness and his refusal to marry and settle down, Hailemariam talks about the importance of *finding oneself* before embarking on societal obligations. Ato Abate gets befuddled and responds by saying: “How could he not know himself when he is the son of the patriot Fitawrari<sup>38</sup> Worku Bante Yergu whose

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<sup>38</sup> *Fitwarari* is a military title that means ‘commander of the vanguard.’ It can equate to the title ‘baron.’ One has to be an aristocrat to reach a prestigious title like *Fitawrari*. Ato Abate cannot figure out why

genes are clear like gold and whose generosity and spirituality is known by all? Perhaps the devil that came between me and my brother is symbolized by you.” (Girma, 1961, p.45)

The novel therefore relays the paradox of the modern man’s notion of individuality as if the notion of the individual that is dominant in the modern age is without precedent. It is true that it is under Western modernity that individualism is anointed as the principle of social ordering, but it is also true that extended-family and kinship relationships helped define individual and communal identities and obligations as well as their corresponding individual and communal rights in the non-Western world. Abera and Hailemariam think that individual autonomy is a breakaway from shackles and that collectivity has deprived the individual of his or her sovereignty and creative possibilities. However, the fact that they cannot escape collective cultural ideas and values compounds their problems of cultural identity. Further interrogation of alternative epistemological models, without a framework that could define the model, complicates the task of their modern ideological constitution in existing tradition. This is articulated in Abera’s turmoiled existentialist understanding of the self:

He was not looking at the painting but through the painting looking at himself. He was looking through his wasted life---the past or the future that he thinks he is going to grab but could yet not see the future that he wants to grab. Who am I he asks, what am I? Am I an object---an object that has no price, an object that is wasted ---who made sure to make me just an object? Did I do that to myself or did society do that to me? Or did the education that I pursued make me this object? What is the objective of education? What is the goal? The purpose of education was to make a person find out about himself. (Girma, 1961, p.46)

Hence, similar to Daganchew Worku’s *Adefres*, the central interpretative locus of Bealu Girma’s novel also focuses on the dangers of imitating European modernity

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Abera is so confused and disoriented in conducting his life coming from an aristocratic background like Fitawrari Worku.

by the Ethiopian elite and the elite's failure to engage modernity in a conscious and critical way. It is also crucial to note that the two novels dismiss the role of female subjectivity in the production of meaning, positioning a form of language that approaches gender differences in essentialist terms. How far did gender ideologies translate into practice in the rhetoric of Ethiopian modernity? What kind of common ground do men's and women's interdiscursivity create in these novels? The working 'body' overwhelmingly focuses on men, positioning the female figure as the 'primitive' female 'body,' as if male modernists like Abera and Hailemariam who desire utter change fear the loss of this hegemony. The female 'body' is presented as enigma, particularly in *KeAdmas Bashager*, erecting a barrier between the body of the Ethiopian woman and the institutional context in which her body is situated.

In *KeAdmas Bashager*, Abera's and Hailemariam's entire discourse of women wrenches women out of the context of their society to inscribe her as object of Ethiopian erotica. Modern writers like Dagnachew Worku and Bealu Girma showed ambivalence and uncertainty in gender issues and took women as an unproblematic universal category where they are identical and interchangeable. Women who were at the margins of Ethiopian modernity were hence portrayed in both novels as sluts, maids, prostitutes and sexually charged objects, fortifying the gender hierarchy. Women's concerns and activities continue to be different from men's and have been omitted from Ethiopian modernism's historical discourse.

*Este Teteyeku*, which means 'let you be asked,' is a collection of poems by one of Ethiopia's powerful and militant intellectual poets, Yohannes Admassu. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on one of Admassu's widely acclaimed poems from which the collection takes its name; *Este Teteyeku*. It portrays the images of the modern collective with radical moral interrogation. In *Este Teteyeku* the author hoped for collectivism that empowered and affirmed the self's transformative power over society.

The poem functions on various levels, simultaneously didactic, political, historical and predictive. The author as both artist and ideologue questions social memory in the context of the cultural crisis of Ethiopian modernity. He questions the intellectual's ruptures with the past and the dramatic changes; perceptual, experiential, and epistemological, which characterize modernity. The poem begins with:

Much as I sought fervently  
An answer to my heart's query  
Consternation was all I got, confusion and worry;  
Oh, this hilarity of mine in these deceitful days,  
When I thought I was so erudite,  
In soothe was it all but harrowing tears.  
My thoughts, though high up in the skies,  
My knowledge, though of the first water,  
What once I hoped I could apprehend through my erudition,  
That knowledge I thought I had  
Was all in vain, futile as it was bland (Admassu, 1962, p.10)  
(Translated from the Amharic by Yonas Admassu, brother)

Yohannes Admassu addressed central questions of modernity in the process of historical evolution, the political divide of modernity, and the emancipation of individuals and society from exploitation and political oppression. A humanist and provocative poet, he is believed to have inaugurated the ontological and epistemological problematic of Marxian social theory on the political thought of the modern Ethiopian intellectual. Although the poem itself does not occupy Marxian discursive space, the author's conscious radicalism, which is critical and self critical of social and historical thought, provided a conceptual alternative for a reconstruction that did not conform to any established model of the country's social organization. Hence, in the 1960s, around the time of this poem which was written in 1962, Marxism became an epistemology among budding student intellectuals of the University College of which Yohannes Admassu was part.

Marxism promised understanding and resolution for a restless intellectual that craved for an idealistic modernity that would wipe out the Ethiopian social ill. Marxism was not a means to historicize legacy, but historicize to serve the cause of present society, the means to comprehend the present as a dialectical moment, a moment between the contradictory past and the present, and the possibility of a new culture that was not the past or the present. A present oriented historicism was a condition particularly of Third World Marxism where the contradictory past was routinely fabricated. The construction of a useable past was a feature of nationalism, where ideology and nationalism resorted to nationalist sentiments that appealed to societal unity for strategic purposes. The dynamics of nationalism invariably directed itself against an antagonistic 'Other,' namely imperialism. The new culture created was supposed to serve as the source of social change. Historical consciousness was informed by this dialectic. Yohannes Admassu never joined the Ethiopian Student Movement, which was later responsible for bringing about Marxism-Leninism as a dominant ideology in State and civil society. Nevertheless, his poem *Este Teteyeku* epitomized the radical social thought of the era. His writing on freedom is as follows:

What significance attaches to?  
This thing you call freedom?  
Is it to while away your days?  
With no word spoken, in utter silence?  
Or, does it have another drift,  
Whether by free choice or edict?  
What fate is this freedom awaiting?  
Whether in common speech or embellished writing,  
As free will is suspended,  
Ere the law is scripted?  
Where principles are suppressed  
While the tongue is muzzled?  
Is it slush, all hear-nothing and a sigh?  
As it might well be turning a blind eye?  
By what name goes this doctrine so quelled,  
In that adobe of yours,

That bounteous Land of the Dead? (Admassu, 1962, p.13)  
(Translated from the Amharic by Yonas Admassu, brother.)

Unlike Dagnachew Worku's *Adefres* that promoted apocalyptic fears about tradition and later about modernity's shortcomings, and Bealu Girma's *Keadmas Bashager* that gave a reductionist and a hyphenated reading on individuality and later the individual's turmoiled existence for not understanding modernity, Yohannes Admassu's *Este Teteyeku* clearly understood and critically assessed the Ethiopian objective reality, that of poverty and ignorance. The poem also called for fundamental social rights. Yohannes Admassu talked about the new collective subject rather than the individual, a collective agency which centered on a powerful narrative of the modern nation. What kind of nation? What kind of consciousness within that nation? A critic as well as an interrogator, Yohannes Admassu deliberated on these questions and urged the modern social imaginary to question the moral order of Ethiopian modernity that had emerged, not in the abstract but as an aspect of the nation's history of consciousness.

For Yohannes Admassu, the individual did not precede society, but individuals should come together to form a political entity that would enable them to serve each other for mutual benefit. For him, this new idea of collective agency should be capable of objectifying society as a field of common agency, making the modern social imaginary active and contemplative, existing and acting simultaneously. In this respect, Yohannes Admassu provided an alternative reading to the vague, unconvinced and unconvincing critique of writers of his era.

Having discussed three of the most important literary works that attempted to interpret the contradictory cultural arena of Ethiopian modernity, how is it possible to interrogate the discursive, political and epistemological power of Ethiopian modern art through the modalities of the literatures analyzed? Perhaps some may argue that

literature is best understood as an aesthetic creation. I argue that literature is influenced by the historical, philosophical and political ideas evident in the period in which it was written. In Ethiopia, literature written in the 1950s and 1960s definitely mirrored the society in which they were produced. The need for a theoretical framework for works of art that were produced during this period calls on the nature of intertextuality of texts written in that period. Julia Kristeva introduced the term 'intertextuality' in 1966 while explaining Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and carnivalization between the constructed and the real.

Bakhtin was one of the first to replace the static hewing of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply exist but is generated in relation to another structure. What allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism is his conception of the 'literary word' as an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character) and the contemporary or earlier cultural context. (Kristeva as cited in Landwehr, 2002)

Indeed, Kristeva's blending or intersecting of various texts are also manifest products of discourses and discursive practices. This understanding of intertextuality is a material basis for a dynamic understanding of culture that goes far beyond conventional notions where the linguistic can also effectively construct and comfortably navigate the politics and aesthetic theories of the visual arts, particularly when the visual arts also showed convergence between social desires and identities. The formalist's privileged and transcended art objects, a self contained system with no reference outside of itself, becomes metaphysics if one is to historicize art in Ethiopia. While questions of form and technique are important, the emergence of modern Ethiopian art necessitates the discourse of a suitable background of historical juncture within the larger discourse of modernity.

From this perspective, I will analyze the works of three significant artists who played a crucial role in the history of Ethiopian modernism: Gebre Kristos Desta, Wossene Kosrof and Abdurahman Sheriff. I argue that just like the literary texts, these modern Ethiopian artists of the 1950s and 1960s reflected an ambivalent and bewildered perception of modernity. When discussing Abdurahman Sheriff, I refrain from discussing his works and instead will particularly focus on the trajectory of the modern Ethiopian intellectual who navigated the terrains of modernity and modernism from one historical juncture to another without critically investigating the past to give meaning to the present.

Gebre Kristos Desta, Wossene Kosrof and Abdurahman Sheriff also came at the height of the anti-colonial and independence movements, which is the second coordinate of my framework. Just like the literary modernists, they also fell short of deliberating on the normative status of Western modernity to construct a different view of modernity characterized by local needs and cultural forces. Moreover, one is inclined to ask why the movement of African decolonization that had its locus in Addis Ababa did not influence both the literary and visual artists of the period; in the articulation of a decolonized culture that had engulfed the continent during this period. Frantz Fanon (1965, p.2) said:

Decolonization, never passes unnoticed for it bears upon being, it fundamentally modifies being, it transforms spectators crushed by inessentiality into privileged actors, seized in a quasi-grandiose manner by glare of history's floodlights. It introduces a proper rhythm into being, brought by new men, a new language, and a new humanity. Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But this creation receives its legitimacy from no supernatural power; the colonized 'thing' becomes man in the process by which it liberates itself.

As Fanon (1965) said, the dramatic experience of decolonization in Africa created a philosophy and an epistemology that inspired the best of African creativity.

Decolonization's dialectic addressed the ordeals of colonialism and the change in attitude of colonizer/colonized on two categories.

On the one hand, a new conservatism responded to Western modernism in a nativist approach inspired by the richness of the African past, motivating artists to explore the potentials of their African heritage. The other side of the dialectic was the imperative to mark a space of local identity in the language of the 'Other' recognizing cross cultural affinity as well as contrast within a critical approach to the relationship between European modernism and the new localized and nuanced version of African modernism. Therefore, the history of the decolonization movement has been, in the main, a movement toward the local articulated in two different approaches of the local. What makes Ethiopia different in this trajectory is the fact that the country has never been colonized except for a brief period of Italian occupation between 1936 and 1941.

Ethiopia was unlike other African countries where the larger implication of colonizer/colonized relationship created a fundamental disjuncture in the history of the colonized and where colonial discourse defined the colonized as irredeemably 'Other.' The inner working of this type of 'Otherness' was neither the ideology nor the discourse of Ethiopian formal social and political thought, although a different feeling of 'Otherness' inconspicuously manifested itself in the intellectual thought and analysis as discussed in Chapter One. This same sort of 'Otherness' was apparent in this wave of intellectuals as well. It prevailed and displayed itself in all areas of intellectual thought. The independence and liberation movements that had engulfed the continent for a new African identity produced different experiences of independence for the Ethiopian emergent elite who were unfamiliar to the colonial structure. The elite instead entered this movement and took account of colonial dominance and decline through the movement's cultural context that forged unities across independence struggles. Given that Addis Ababa was the home for the Organization of African Unity, and Ethiopia

was a rallying site for Pan-Africanism, the city was transformed to a vibrant hub of cultural intersection. This new social movement galvanized the intellectual to suppose a theory of power and social change not necessarily or primarily against the colonial power's cultural hegemony, but against the ambiguities of modern citizenship in the Ethiopian state.

### ***Gebre Kristos Desta: The Painter Poet***

I have argued that a reflection on the history of art and its theories and methods should be analyzed in relation to its contemporary milieu of cultural and intellectual ideas. It is from this perspective that I will approach and interpret the works of Gebre Kristos Desta whose works reference the Ethiopian intellectual's charged context of change and innovation in the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, Gebre Kristos Desta plays a very important role in the critical consciousness of this history, as the larger narrative of the 'modern' in art and its various tendencies within the Ethiopian sensibility is said to have largely emanated in his works and the works of Skunder Boghossian. They both returned to Ethiopia in the 1960s from West Germany and Paris respectively to teach at the Fine Art School.

While Boghossian's modernist vocabulary was replete with traditional metaphorical allusions that I discussed in Chapter Two, Desta narrated images of the 'modern' without its traditional referent. A thorough analysis of Desta's work is essential since he is said to have been the principal player in the formation of Ethiopian modernism. Although contemporary popular imaginary implies that Desta influenced many artists, the inspiration of his work can be seen in only a few of his students like Yohannes Gedamu, Tibebe Terfa and Desta Hagos. Although many were captivated by the novelty of the works, particularly of the works done after his return from Germany, many also did not relate to its contemporaneity. Indeed, he is said to have influenced a

generation of artists, although I argue the contrary. It was Boghossian's work that had inspired many students at the time, and the material that these artists gradually accumulated from his works had long been produced without any idea that it was fulfilling the course of Ethiopian modern art history. One could still see the outlines of Boghossian's originality in many contemporary works. The contradictions between modernity's universality and particularity, between individual autonomy and collective rationality, which I have attempted to show in the trajectory of Ethiopian literary modernism, attests themselves in the works of Gebre Kristos Desta. The fragmented view of modernity and the failure of modernities' attempts to create its own normativity that manifested itself in the texts of *KeAdmas Bashager* and *Adefres* was part of his visual narrative.

How did Gebre Kristos Desta's works engage a series of complex readings of problematic, ambiguous, and often contradictory meanings of modernity that the text of *Adefres*, *KeAdmas Bashager* and *Este Teteyeku* represented? How does one read his works as these literary texts that underlined the problematic nature of Ethiopian modernity? What were Desta's subject positions, and his discourse of visual and cultural representation? How has he engaged principal questions of modernity; that of rationality, ideology and the individual self, within the matrix of modern art, and how has he defined the meaning of their location in nationalist and internationalist discourse?

These are questions that are vitally important in comprehending his works through critical themes of representation, cross-cultural representation, self-representation, and their influences on one another. Born in 1932, Gebre Kristos Desta began as a self-taught artist until he studied paintings and graphics at the Academy of Art in Cologne, Germany from 1957 to 1961. His father Aleka Desta was a clergy man and a religious painter who worked on manuscript illuminations and other traditional

themes. Discussing his childhood and his father's early influence on his art, Desta (as cited in Debela, 2006) said: "My father used to write the Holy Book, copying the gospel for the church. I grew up watching that. He really encouraged me." In the 1950s, Desta immersed himself in works that recognized his sensitivity to the society he lived in. Works like *Poor Family*, *Beggars* and *Meimenan* articulated the revelation of human misery, the disturbing reality of the vagaries of unemployment, begging and prostitution. It was in Germany that he made a methodological shift from his earlier works and became attached to German Expressionist works. Despite his training in Germany during the heydays of Abstract Expressionism, Desta's works during this period and later until the revolution of 1974 profoundly explored German Expressionist styles. He challenged the goal of imitating reality. Just like the German Expressionists, he used bold lines, vivid colors, distorted images, incisive self portraits, chaotic urban scenes and joyous landscapes.

At a time when abstract art was alien to many Ethiopians, Desta insisted that modern art, particularly in its abstract form, mirrored discourses of modernity and that one had to embrace this style of art despite its density and complexity to the Ethiopian artistic sensibility. He saw modern art as modernity's stamp of power and authority. Just like Dagnachew Worku's Adefres and Bealu Girma's Abera and Hailemariam, Desta hence had an acute awareness and sensibility to Western modernity, and just like the characters mentioned, he portrayed ambivalence, moral doubt, and anxiety towards vernacular culture.

Indeed, after returning from Germany, Desta engrossed himself in a series of abstract compositions *re-presenting* his understanding of the modern world. *Green Abstract* (1966) (see Figure 3.1) and *Crystalline*<sup>39</sup> (1969) (see Figure 3.2) were all generative of new modes of making and looking at art.

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<sup>39</sup> See Appendix for description.



Figure 3.1 Gebre Kristos Desta, *Green Abstract*, 1966, oil on canvas, 80 x 120 cm., courtesy of Modern Art Museum, Gebre Kristos Desta Center, Addis Ababa



Figure 3.2 Gebre Kristos Desta, *Crystalline*, 1975, oil on hard-board 81 x 100 cm., courtesy of Modern Art Museum Gebre Kristos Desta Center, Addis Ababa

At stake, however, was how the society thought about the artwork in relation to temporality and subjectivity. In his acceptance speech for the Haile Selassie I Foundation award, Desta said: (1965)

Modern art reflects the artists' view of the world, its intricacies, its beauty and its creativity. Art can no longer be comprehended in a confined way like it had been for centuries. Today, the modern world understands art as a basis of knowledge to investigate many things. This has seemingly made modern art as knowledge that looks chaotic and confused on the canvas. This seeming confusion nevertheless consists of its own rules and regulations. The larger public will find it difficult to appreciate modern art until these rules and regulations are fully deciphered.<sup>40</sup>

In various statements like the above, Gebre Kristos Desta attempted to highlight the processual aspect of Ethiopian modern art vis-à-vis its essentialization. He nevertheless fell short of problematizing the construing of modernity as a fixed socio-historical trait and instead transformed all talks about modernity into a simple conception towards Europeanization and its cultural precepts. His statements compelled citizens to acquire new subjectivity that abolished all that was local and traditional. Nevertheless, I argue that this new self that he attempted to construct was never as free from his traditional self as he claimed it to be, but instead constituted the background against which his works could be examined. While he devalued different modes of Ethiopian cultural agency and downplayed the forging of creative links between local and global, his works nevertheless drew from a wide range of Ethiopian history and philosophy sources. Needless to say, his conflicting relationship with vernacular culture was encumbered with the conception of a particular type of 'modern' that constituted both a certain turn of mind and a certain way of thinking that elucidated his modern aspect of existence against his socio-cultural background.

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<sup>40</sup> Archive #2418, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

For instance, his seminal work *Golgotha*,<sup>41</sup> (see Figure 3.3) a painting of the crucifix depicted in bloody red, portrays the suffering and cost inextricably connected to the cross of Christ. In the Ethiopian Orthodox iconography one never sees Christ in agony, but in inner peace and consolation.



Figure 3.3 Gebre Kristos Desta, *Golgotha* 1963, oil on hard-board 183 x 122 cm., courtesy of Modern Art Museum, Gebre Kristos Desta Center, Addis Ababa

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<sup>41</sup> See Appendix for description.

Desta defies this concept in *Golgotha* as if to intentionally deconstruct the Orthodox mythology. In this painting, there is no edification, no peace, no contrition, and no hope; there is only despair as if the death of Christ imitates ordinary human death. Not only is *Golgotha* not devotional like other crucifixes of the Orthodox Church, but it is a satanic one, extinguishing all emphasis of hope from the Christian soul, which is precisely a contradiction of the message of the Orthodox Cross. In *Golgotha*, I argue that Desta addressed his experiences, his history, and intellectual tradition to critical engagement.

Although many did not understand his works, Desta could not escape his social experience and its conceptual ontological status that was continual and evolving and that gave its contemporary legitimacy. The lack of critical scholarship at the time, which could have engaged his works, as that which was inherited from his Ethiopian cultural and social particularity, created resiliency and skepticism from the public about the purpose of his work. Desta himself was preoccupied with European modernism's theoretical concerns rather than deeply interrogating the relevance or philosophy of his works to the Ethiopian public. Attempting to reconcile these differences Solomon Deressa (1967, p.3) wrote:

Just as asphalt roads built to connect two points of the Ethiopian empire are Ethiopian, containing all the qualities and defects of the Ethiopians who build them, so to a house designed for the comfortable living of an Ethiopian family with this country is an Ethiopian regardless of whether the kitchen is inside or out. Now, a house built for the natives of this country renders daily living. Both times consuming and uncomfortable is not un-Ethiopian, but simply bad. A skyscraper in some village in Wollega, however Ethiopian and its motifs, are and would reflect on the builder's lack of common sense. A portrait of a German girl by a good Ethiopian painter is necessarily more Ethiopian, than either a portrait of an Ethiopian face by a foreigner, a schmaltzy portrait of an Ethiopian peasant by a slick Ethiopian painter. The schmaltz is neither Ethiopian nor un-Ethiopian, but quite simply bad. In short, it is difficult to realize how a good work by a sincere Ethiopian artist can be anything but Ethiopian.

There is no evidence indicating that Desta ever implied that his work was exclusively confined to European modernism and that the surface of his canvas declared itself to be just that. However, if we ask the question, did Desta express the complexities of his Ethiopian experience, we can say that he was ambivalent to addressing the problem of contextuality in his works. His work was embedded in a context, but the artist, in several of his statements, wanted to paradoxically transcend that context; as if he feared dependency to that context. A formalist analysis of many of his paintings would be jagged and distorted lines, rapid brushwork, and lush and intense colors. Questions of history, consciousness and agency remained ambiguous in these paintings where the links between art and a broader cultural politics was generally hazy.

The broader public could not understand his work as it was distinctly different from the Coptic Orthodox visual expression it was used to. Moreover, modern visual art was new for consumption. Indeed, a concern with form characterized Gebre Kristos Desta's works after returning from Germany where he was taught about the history of European modernism, and particularly of its paramount concepts of self-referentiality and self-criticality. The emphasis on moving painting toward non-representation was at its peak while he was a student in Cologne, and the autonomy of the medium was debated by critics like Clement Greenberg.

Form rather than content was systematically highlighted by Western artists and critics of the time. After coming back to Ethiopia, Gebre Kristos Desta also reiterated to his students the use of the imagination in works of art, rather than its representational form as a paradigm of the modernist idiom. If Desta believed or understood the larger philosophy of the modernist's unity of propensity and autonomy, he did not succeed in instilling it in his students. On the contrary, for Desta's students such as Tadesse Mesfin and Eshetu Tiruneh, the legacies of European modernism were confined in

distinct boundaries of representational art. He could not convince his students of both the artistic and conceptual aspects since he neglected a larger perspective of cultural signification that would have been relevant for these students to address the social, historical and cultural experiences of the Ethiopian reality within the larger paradigm of modernist expression. One could make the same analogy in the text of *Adefres* where the relevance and meaning of local contexts is seen as a wholly different dynamic and often with antagonistic qualities to modernity. In his attempt to evolve ways of life appropriate to modern culture, Adefres faces a number of societal challenges stemming from the values and practices of cultural experiences that can never be determined by European modernity's universal indicators alone.

Just like Adefres and the characters in *KeAdmas Basahger*, Desta's understanding of modernism was also indefinite. The nuances of a localized modernism failed to be appropriately articulated. In many of Desta's comments, European modernity transcended regional identity in its supposedly unique ability to address human problems despite his works' subtle depiction of his Ethiopian experience which, he could not escape. The intellectual elite who wrote about his works at the time, like Solomon Deressa, also fell short of articulating to the larger public the local nuances of his work. On the one hand, they were just as animated as Desta about the novelty of European modern art, and on the other, they were not trained art historians and critics who could significantly engage his works to task. Moreover, as said earlier, modern art was a new experience in the Ethiopian imaginary. It should have been critical for intellectuals at the time to bridge the gap between the aesthetic dimension of European modernism and a nation's evolving social consciousness.

Popular consciousness was hence unable to recognize Desta's works as an ideal of modernity when examined in light of the construction of one's own history and identity. His art was met with harsh criticism and newspaper articles accused him of

abandoning traditional Ethiopian themes after coming back from Germany attacking his immersion with a foreign art form that was difficult to understand. His reply to this sentiment was:

It is funny that people who know nothing about the history of art attach such exaggerated importance to the art of their own country. They don't realize how international art really is. Picasso would hardly have created his "Cubism" had he not seen African Art. Matisse was influenced by Islamic traditions. Gauguin went as far as Tahiti to find new inspirations. We create ultra modern houses in our developing countries. We build super highways on which we drive the latest model cars from all over the world. We use all sorts of up to date international styles in technology, science, education, medicine and what have you. Why in the world should art be different? (Desta, 1969)<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, as Desta said, what appears so familiarly 'modern' to us has its own historicity and trajectory. Although the avant-gardism of Picasso and company self-consciously subverted the colonial stereotypes of the 'grotesque' and the 'primitive,' their method was unfortunately intended to only critique civilization by embracing an imagined 'primitiveness' of Africans whose 'authenticity' they opposed to a 'decadent' West. African artists have nevertheless changed Picasso's avant-gardism into their own articulation of African modernism for a politicized philosophy in attacking European values and challenging the notion of European cultural primacy. "In the negrophiliac relationship," said Petrine Archer-Straw (2000, p.4), "both Europeans and Africans owned stereotypical views about each other. They formed what can be called an 'other' relationship whereby their attraction fed off their differences rather than their similarities. The process of 'otherizing' allowed both partners to act out myths and fantasies." Critical recovery and phenomenology of African modernism hence owes its scholarship to the various deconstructive arguments against European modernity and its political, ideological and socio-economic processes. It is this crucial route that Desta

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<sup>42</sup> Archive #2418, the Institute of Ethiopian Studies.

disregarded to construct when he talked about the cross-cultural influences of modern art.

The importance of being ‘modern’ and the indispensability of European modern thought to representations of non-European modernity were not at question in the Ethiopian social imaginary. What was at question was the problem of representation that this indispensability invariably creates if one falls short of finding his/her location within the larger paradigm of European thought. For Gebre Kristos Desta, poetry was also just as dear as painting. An incredible poet, he wrote in a concentrated and elliptical language seeking an ecstatic hymn-like lyricism. While one does not know whether he read Expressionist poets like Georg Heym and Ernst Stadler, his language was condensed just as the Expressionist poets was, utilizing strings of nouns and eliminating narrative and description to get to the essence of feeling. His poetry, just as his paintings, was unfamiliar and controversial to the Ethiopian sensibility. His critics questioned whether they were poems at all. In a letter to African Arts, critic Solomon Deressa (1967, p.23) wrote: “Gebre Kristos Desta, a painter who perhaps is overly cerebral on canvas, is so far the only Ethiopian poet who unwittingly or not, has unleashed raging controversy in the local papers as to whether his poem are poems at all. It is difficult to believe that the journalists fail to see the sparse beauty of his rhythm in several dimensions.”

Desta’s experimentation with an unmediated modernity came to an end after the revolution of 1974 when the socialist military junta took over and their gruesome rule (1974-1991) brought mayhem and cruelty. His later works, especially the ones made in 1979, evoked socially critical tableaux over life. Desta forged a drama of social protest in many of his later works. He narrated themes of repression and misery that pervaded

his country. It was in 1979, at the height of the infamous ‘Red Terror’<sup>43</sup> of the military junta, when thousands were labeled reactionaries and slaughtered on the streets of Addis Ababa in the name of Marxism-Leninism. It was then when he worked on paintings such as *In the Third World* (see Figure 3.4) and *In the Grotto*.<sup>44</sup> (See Figure 3.5)



Figure 3.4 Gebre Kristos Desta, *In the Third World*, 1979, aquarell, 80 x 60.5 cm., courtesy of Modern Art Museum Gebre Kristos Desta Center, Addis Ababa

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<sup>43</sup> In 1979, the military junta launched what is called The Red Terror to supposedly wipe out reactionaries that were detrimental to the revolution. This onslaught was mainly aimed at the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Party which was gaining momentum in the guerilla warfare that it was conducting both in the countryside and in urban areas. The Red Terror massacred many young students that were suspected of being EPRP members. Amnesty International estimates that the death toll could have been over 500,000. Groups of people were herded into churches that were then burnt down and women were subjected to systematic rape by soldiers.

<sup>44</sup> See Appendix for description.



Figure 3.5 Gebre Kristos Desta, *In the Grotto*, 1979, acrylic on carbon, 100 x 150 cm., courtesy of Modern Art Museum Gebre Kristos Desta Center, Addis Ababa

Modern art was suddenly thrown out of the discourse of power, lifting from its artists the burden of history. Through these paintings, he narrated the intricate dialectics of trauma and the aftermaths of genocide. The paintings portrayed an emotional imprisonment depicting an erasure of history. When history is abolished, identity also ceases to exist. Gebre Kristos Desta went into exile in 1979 to Oklahoma, U.S.A. and died there in 1981. Unfortunately, many of these works were not exhibited to the public at the time, considering the political nature of the country. They were for the first time exhibited in 2006 at Addis Ababa University when many related to the traumatic events of the country through these paintings.

The figures in *The Third World* or *The Grotto* are concealed from any form of identity. The figures also depict the painter in the act of witnessing, remembering, and expressing that he himself was heavily traumatized. For the first time after coming back from Germany, Gebre Kristos Desta produced works that clearly articulated his environment, which was one of the ravages of war, famine and genocide, bringing to

the forefront a collective consciousness that also possessed collective causality. These paintings depicted the constraints and challenges of modernity which took shape within a reductive view of Marxism that became instrumental in the rhetoric of the socialist junta.

Desta's works around this time seem to have reverberated Yohannes Admassu's pose, *Este Teteyeku*. It was in the 1950s that Yohannes Admassu probed the social memory of Ethiopians and its material embodiments, but it was not until 1974 that this memory of the intellectual realized that optimistic promises of the meta-narrative of modernity can also quickly demonstrate that it has a dark side. Admassu questioned earlier on the intellectual's obsession with defining the teleological myth of 'progress' and 'civilization' through beautiful metaphors of the unconscious wound. He restructured the collective unconscious through the dark underworld of the land of the dead, questioning the people's experiences into the unknowable darkness. The darkness was part of him, the intellectual, and that awareness was not erased but heightened by recognition of that dark self. His underworld journey of dark meditation nevertheless remained unresolved as his eagerness to discover a lost aspect of the 'self' had become invisible under the influence and pressure of being Ethiopian in an Ethiopia that was socially confused in modernity's fragmentation and complexity.

In *Este Teteyeku*, Yohannes Admassu summoned the dead. One can construe death as perhaps a metaphor for the collapse of humanism. One can also see this metaphor in Desta's *Grotto* of mummified images, as if Desta also was summoning the dead. Through the dead, Yohannes Admassu's poetry interrogated the conventional understanding of the 'modern,' that of freedom, education, individuality, etc, that did not stand up to multiple histories and shifting meanings of modernity. Hence, earlier on in his critique of Ethiopian humanism, Yohannes Admassu metaphorically presented the coming of Ethiopian modernity as a permanent process of mystification and

demystification. The social critique by Yohannes Admassu was also felt in later chapters of self reflectivity in Dagnachew Worku's Adefres and Bealu Girma's Abera and Hailemariam. The characters interrogate the philosophy of an imaginary universality that had presupposed vernacular Ethiopian culture. They become disillusioned with a modernity that fails to speak of the dynamism of a changing Ethiopia and a modernity that lacks a contextual understanding of its position in the larger scenario of Ethiopian identity politics. Gebre Kristos Desta also went through the same trajectory. Once enamored by European modernism, Desta's works manifested confusion and disillusionment in the later years.

Just like the literary modernists of the time, the superficial trappings of European modernity manifested in the pictorial vocabulary of the students of Gebre Kristos Desta and Skunder Boghossian. One such student that I attempt to analyze is Wossene Kosrof. I begin with his student works since my interest in this study is how the beginning of Ethiopian modernism was approached and interpreted in second generation artists. While I have attempted to show the starting point of Ethiopian modernism through two of its pioneers, Skunder Boghossian and Gebre Kristos Desta, I will now explore the understanding and conceptualization of modernism by their students, expanding the ways in which Ethiopian modernism has been relativized in cultural and subjective orientations.

### ***Wossene Kosrof***

Born in 1950, Wossene Kosrof graduated from the Fine Art School in Addis Ababa. He was taught at the Fine Art School by both Gebre Kristos Desta and Skunder Boghossian. Kosrof remembers Desta "as always interested in composition and always wanting his students to continuously improve in their sense of composition." (Kosrof as cited in Biasio, 2006, p.66) He has attributed his early influence to Gebre Kristos Desta

and role models such as the Sudanese artists Ibrahim El-Salahi, Ahmed Shibrain and Mohammed Omer Khalil. Yet, Kosrof's student works, except for one piece that looks like Desta, can all be attributed to Boghossian's influence. "Out of all of us who were students of Gebre Kristos and Skunder," said classmate and colleague Tadesse Mesfin (personal communication, June, 2008), "Wossene was probably the one who took most of Skunder's formal qualities."

Indeed, the student works of Wossene Kosrof are replete with Boghossian's metaphorical allusions. Boghossian always reflected on the relationship of national consciousness to art. For him, the pairing of art and its social context was inseparable, and in images that made an invisible world present alongside the visible one, he interpreted beautifully what is seen through objects of the imagination. Skunder Boghossian, Ethiopia's avant-garde modernist lived in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s at a time when a number of the political leaders of the anti-colonial movements began their careers as poets and artists. The inseparability of African and European modernity was nowhere more prevalent than among the artists who were part of the independence movements of Africa. As discussed in Chapter Two, Boghossian was part of this group who attempted to follow the complex narratives of the independence movements, of the appropriation, rejection, and permutation of diverse experiences and cultural contexts.

At issue then is how well students like Wossene Kosrof and others like Zerihun Yetemgeta and Tesafye Tessema, who emulated Boghossian at that time, understood his articulation of an alternative African modernity. Did Boghossian communicate this thought to his students? What was it about him that mesmerized students like Kosrof? Did his students understand his aesthetic mode of thinking both at the level of conceptual frameworks and at the level of his approaches to art? I argue that both from artistic and conceptual aspects, students like Wossene Kosrof did not understand the different contexts of modernist art at its inception. On the one hand, the school lacked

trained art historians and theorists who could teach the theories of modernist art and its codified artistic formalism and on the other, students came from an educational background that lacked a wider understanding of educational matters and from schools that were poorly funded and staffed. Moreover, students were admitted to the Fine Art School from 8<sup>th</sup> grade, which also contributed to the limitations of their educational background. A hallmark of these young students, nevertheless, was a fashionable and a vogue rejection of tradition.

It was fashionable at the time for the older intellectuals to seek prestige with an emerging viewpoint and sensibility that valued and symbolized fragmentation and existential doubt in artworks and poetry that the intellectual insisted was free from imposed meaning. The popularity of self-discovery in art was particularly an essential feature for art critics like Solomon Deressa and Kifle Biseat who had just returned from the West and good friends of Skunder Boghossian, Dagnachew Worku and Bealu Girma. In magazines like *Addis Review*, critic Solomon Deressa reiterated the importance of non-representational art to the modern mind. This was also echoed in the texts of both *Adefres* and *KeAdmas Bashager*. For instance, in the text of *KeAdmas Bashager*, Abera aspires to be an artist, avidly seeking to radically depart from the existentialist turmoil of living in a society that does not understand his modernist awareness of ‘individuality’ and ‘consciousness.’ The ending of the text insinuates that departure when Abera is left with a canvas as if finding his final refuge in the canvas. One can also find this sanctuary in *Adefres*. In a conversation between Belay (a local from Debre Sina) and Kebret (*Adefres*’ friend and proclaimed modern artist), Kebret says to Belay’s query of not understanding what he was trying to paint on the canvas: “I am not aiming to paint reality; I do not want to copy reality just like a camera. The camera takes lifeless objects. I paint what I feel inside, what you feel inside, life and

death, ignorance and knowledge, your consciousness, my consciousness.” (Worku, 1955, p.91)

The movement of a brush stroke over representation and a mind unfolding its thought through non-representational symbols became the intellectual’s cachet. Boghossian's art was impressive to young artists of the time with its belief in the arbitrary and its fragmented and dreamlike narrative. Nevertheless, unlike Desta, Boghossian included familiar themes of Orthodox and African repertoire in his work which students related to. Moreover, the artist was eccentric and original in his unforgettable teaching performance that dazzled many of his students. Artist Abdurrahman Sheriff, who started teaching at the Fine Art School in the 1960s and who was Director of the school from 1974-1991, commented on the state of the Fine Art School at the time and Boghossian’s popularity:

Both Skunder and Gebre Kristos were very influential to their students after coming back from France and Germany respectively. Skunder nevertheless was immensely popular and many students copied his self image as well as his art. It was very difficult to teach students the theoretical approaches to modern art at that time. For one, teachers themselves did not have the theoretical background and were instead totally involved in the pictorial conception. Modern art was fashionable and was the thing to do. Students also came from a background that was educationally challenged. For then too it was trendy to paint like Skunder without understanding the conceptual link to his works. (Sheriff, personal communication, 2008)

Indeed, students were enamored by Skunder Boghossian who had just recently returned from Paris. While Zerihun Yetemeta took on the ‘shemane loom,’<sup>45</sup> which he continues to produce even today, Wossene Kosrof took on the scrolls<sup>46</sup> and the different

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<sup>45</sup> The shemane loom is a weaving loom for making the cotton garbs (the shemmas) that Ethiopians use as their main attire. Boghossian started using the loom when he returned from Paris. He painted the magical scrolls on these looms. Zerihun Yetemeta was one Boghossian’s students then. He is heavily influenced by Boghossian and still uses the ‘shemane loom’ in almost all his works.

<sup>46</sup> The Ethiopian Orthodox scrolls, otherwise known as the magical scrolls, are made of goat skin. They are supposed to be medicinal for all types of ailments. They are normally made by ‘*debtaras*’ who are

symbols that Skunder Boghossian had become well-known for. As a student in the Fine Art School, Kosrof's works echoed that of Boghossian's. He utilized his symbolical constructs such as the magical scrolls without the complexity of Boghossian's appropriation, rejection and permutation of European modernity I have mentioned above. Wossene Kosrof's student works in the Fine Art School hence emulated these works without really understanding its layered meanings. From this perspective, Kosrof was not different from Adefers, Abera and Hailemariam who were enamored by an idealized conception of modernity and modernity's misleading dream.

The epistemological decolonization of the mind, as well as the revelation of an authentic African self, enabled artists like Boghossian to function and to establish a discursive and material practice. The realities of Boghossian's processes were nevertheless confined to a romantic mold by young artists like Wossene Kosrof. Their works depicted the problematic way in which young artists' appropriation conceived the challenges of the beginning of an African modernism. Kosrof's artistic career therefore began with a lack of the intellectual ability to fully communicate the crisis and schisms of modernity that Boghossian tried to articulate. Within this context, the making of an Ethiopian modernist in the visual arts therefore discounted the evaluation of important issues to the discourse of modern art. Forms of modernist expression presented themselves without the artist's visual and critical contributions to discourses of modernism in Ethiopian art history.

What makes Wossene Kosrof important to my argument is his fair success in the international art market scene. How has his success been perceived and analyzed by international critics and historians? After leaving the Fine Art School, did he recreate, reposition and manipulate Boghossian's original thought to one of his own? Given his

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part of the clergy, but not well respected by other clergy men. They can neither celebrate mass nor take confession as other priests of the church because they invoke Satan to do good or evil by reciting mysterious texts. A debtera scroll is normally worn around the neck to cure ailments.

early background, did Wossene Kosrof extend his work after leaving the Fine Art School to include the debate of the stylistic and conceptual complexities of an alternative African modernism? Moreover, how have Kosrof's works fared in contemporary ideological, aesthetic and philosophical milieu of African modernism, considering that the critical recovery of the beginning of Ethiopian modernism becomes paramount to the reconstruction of modern Ethiopian art history?

I believe that these queries probe into the philosophical roots of Ethiopian modernism and are significant in helping frame the historical aspect of its contemporary world, as well as the historical processes of the past, which are both central to the research of Ethiopian modern art and the critical discourse that should be surrounding it. It is from this perspective that I am looking at Wossene Kosrof's work to help fill in an otherwise blank space on the Ethiopian art historical map and make good argument for a historicized approach to Ethiopia's engagement with modernism. What is at issue is that Ethiopian modern art and its continuity between separate historical moments has taken a historical genealogy that is flawed. Not only are the central players of the beginning of Ethiopian modernism overlooked, but confronting the central question of Ethiopian modernism, where the modern culture of the arts is naturally a particular historical configuration of the general trend of its beginning, is missing. Hence, an in-depth examination that captures the cadence and energy of the beginning of Ethiopian modernism should retain primacy over an ahistorical relegation of contemporary works like Wossene Kosrof's into the general concept of an Ethiopian contemporary.

I argue that Wossene Kosrof's work continued to mimic Boghossian's until the 1980s when his works shifted to encapsulate the Amharic alphabet while still insinuating Boghossian's formal qualities. Today, Wossene Kosrof talks about a hybrid form of creativity.

I was trained as a naturalistic painter. But all that worked looked the same. I was not going to paint as I saw. The works of Picasso, Miro and Kandinsky led me in a different direction. to re-examine the forms and compositions in classical Ethiopian art and to draw inspiration from them. I needed to break something down----so I turned to Ethiopian church art. I worked on goatskin which the priests used as parchment and continued to break up the images, that is when the writing began to fascinate me. (Kosrof as cited in Purpura, 2006, p.12)

As said above, it is invariably imperative to broach Ethiopian modernism from a proper perspective of its origins and trajectories. Boghossian's students like Yohannes Gedamu and Tadesse Mesfin remember his use of parchment in the 1960s at the Fine Art School and their fascination by his use of this media to produce some of the fantastic images of Ethiopian modernism. Whether Kosrof's use of parchment and other symbols he has used was influenced by Boghossian or not is not the only issue here. A proper Ethiopian art historical certitude should nevertheless credit Boghossian for being the pioneer to have juxtaposed traditional parchment in Ethiopian modernist vocabulary. It was in Paris that Boghossian began to experiment with the power of the invisible beings that dominated his artistic expression and his being for the remainder of his life. I discussed in Chapter Two the use of Boghossian's *debtera* scrolls, which were mainly made of parchments. I have argued that the articulation of Ethiopian visual modernism began with the images of Skunder Boghossian. The interest in Wossene Kosrof's works by Western art critics and historians over the last few years has been nevertheless disappointing. They are mostly concerned with his lush colors and the Ge'ez alphabets that he frequently used or the magical scrolls that he still juxtaposed, completely disregarding Boghossian's work that Kosrof has many times tried to emulate. Boghossian used the Ge'ez words in the 1950s along manuscript like illuminated colors, Ethiopian icons and particularly the magical scrolls that Kosrof

frequently uses. “Coming as he does from Ethiopia,” said C. Daniel Dawson (2006, p.5), “it is not surprising that Wossene has an understanding of art as medicine. Ethiopian culture has a long tradition of magical healing scrolls and paintings, as well as rituals and music with the same intent.”

Boghossian’s contribution to and influence on Kosrof’s paintings is nevertheless largely discounted mainly because of the unfamiliarity to Boghossian’s works by contemporary Western historians and critics. Moreover, the critical practices championed by artists like Skunder Boghossian who have confronted Africa's modernity during the colonial and immediate post independence eras should not be marginalized since these artists have greatly contributed to the vision and critical imagination of second generation African modernists like Wossene Kosrof. “For me,” continued Dawson (2006, p.5), “Wossene’s concern with the processes inside his paintings has helped him develop a personal language of visual relationships. Not only are his paintings composed of specific types of symbols, letters or words but these elements have a relationship with each other.”

What are the ‘symbols’ or the ‘zones’ that Dawson is discussing? When Boghossian used these zones and symbols, it was with deep reverence for the meaning of these symbols and their profound cultural implications. The trajectory of contemporary African art and artists will remain full of dark zones if African artists remain trapped with the idea of what is authentic or not to present to the outside world. I believe that the lack of art historical scholarship and criticism in Ethiopian modernism has hence essentialized and universalized the discourse of art historical objects, running the risk of mystification and relying utterly on a commitment to a sense that remains untouched by a modernity that had its problems in interpretation at its inception. The total immersion by Western critics and historians in the art in itself disregards its inherent dilemma in its initial phase and its problematic continuity despite its quandary.

Needless to say, what remained unanswered is hence the unique trajectory of Ethiopian modernity and modernism.

Kosrof's works have relatively moved away from the works of Skunder Boghossian since the 1980s with his usage of symbols like the credit card and the Coca Cola bottle. Nevertheless, like the literary discourses of Ethiopian modernity, the modern experience in the visual arts has also failed to interpret the limitations and potentialities of modernity both at its inception and its continuity. While there should be different permutations and combinations around which the notion of Ethiopian modernism is articulated, current discourse conceptualizes it as a movement from simple to complex, and from tradition to modernity. It is in this reductionist rendition of modernity that an analysis of Wossene Kosrof's work, and with it the trajectory of Ethiopian modernism, has been accounted for by Western art historians and critics. It is true that this compartmental analysis of Ethiopian modernism accounts for certain dimensions of modernity, but it is also true that there are several categories that have organized the comprehension of Ethiopian modernism.

As seen in the analysis of the two texts of *KeAdmas Bashager* and *Adefres*, it is within this incomplete and inefficient rejection of plurality that the intellectual has grappled with the idea of modernity, or the purity and autonomy of the universal concept of modernity, which became compromised by its derivative and incomplete appropriation. The adoption of modernity as an idea among Ethiopian intellectuals framed a distinctive conceptual form that has and continues to filter in the history of Ethiopian modernism, its visual component particularly underlining its flawed temporal orientation. An appropriate analysis of its beginning and explanation of where it is presently has lost significance. I brought Wossene Kosrof's work to the forefront because I believe that questions about how the contemporary art world has been

shaped, its genealogy and historiography should be within the context of an art historical conception that pertains to actual trajectories.

### *Abdurahman Sheriff*

What make Abdurhman Sheriff interesting to Ethiopian visual modernism are the peculiar position of Ethiopian modernity and the position he occupied in its cultural and discursive space. A critical scrutiny into his career hence brings into being a notion of modernity and, simultaneously, a narrative of its history. Born in 1939, Abdurahman Sheriff initially studied with Ibrahim El-Salahi at the Khartoum Technical Institute and later in the Fine Art School in Addis Ababa. In 1961, he received a scholarship to study painting at the Academie der bilbeneden Kunste in Kassel Germany and Academie der Kunste in Berlin. He returned to Ethiopia from Germany in 1968 and worked as an instructor of art education and graphics at the Fine Art School. He became Director of the School for seventeen years throughout the socialist regime (1975-1992).

His artistic career is located between two moments in the narrative of the Ethiopian modern, it is between two contradictory intellectual positions of an historical antithesis, which are a deterministic and progressivist conception of Marxist modernity and an absolute norm of European modernity. Despite all appearances to the contrary, this trajectory formed a single contradictory coherence in the narrative of Ethiopian modernity. One of the more intriguing instances of being in this position asserts the real centrality of particular, localized, and contingent truths about the ways modernity is structured.

Abdurahman Sheriff has said that he started out his artistic career with abstract compositions that reflected and explored the layered background of his Ethiopian heritage. He drew inspiration from both Christian and Muslim heritage, simultaneously affirming in his works the illuminated manuscripts and icons of the Ethiopian Orthodox

Church as well as his experience as a Harari Muslim.<sup>47</sup> Like his contemporary and colleague Gebre Kristos Desta, Abdurahman Sheriff was influenced by the German Expressionists. In my conversation with him, Sheriff echoed Desta's belief in art's ability to affect feelings directly without imitating nature, although his own works can be referable to Orthodox Christianity and Islam that have coexisted in Ethiopia since the prophet Mohamed's time. Early on, Sheriff articulated this continuity within a larger art conversation. How then did this version of modernity, which he said addressed the perceived autonomy of art, persevere in a period of political turmoil, confusion and demoralization? Needless to say, the manifold contradictory position that gave birth to Ethiopian modernism also situates itself in the multiplicity of paths that it has taken. The similar trajectories of the literary and visual modernists indeed manifest themselves in Abdurahman Sheriff's artistic career.

Director of the Fine Art School during the entire gruesome period of the military junta, Abdurahman Sheriff's legacy as an artist was hijacked by a modernity of what Donald Donham (1999, p.134) has called "an appropriation of an appropriation of an appropriation." Donham (ibid) said that during this period "Ethiopian modernism sometimes turned profoundly irrational." His promising experimentation with modernist expression that started out with several exhibitions after his return from Germany was suddenly overturned by political events that confined him to socialist administrative tasks, under a regime that denied critical perspectives on scholarship of modernism and modernity.

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<sup>47</sup> Harar is a walled city in the eastern part of Ethiopia. Harar was a fiercely religious city and was a forbidden city (closed to visitors) until 1887 when Menelik II restored central rule. With its 99 mosques, including the 16th Century Grand Mosque, with its beautiful twin towers and slender minaret, it is considered to be the fourth most holy city in Islam after Mecca, Medina.

No crisis had been so profound to the trajectories of arts and culture than the introduction of Marxism to Ethiopian history, where new trajectories of authority, memory and identity-formation emerged. The autonomy of the aesthetic and cognitive sovereignty that professed itself earlier on in the works of artists like Abdurahman Sheriff contested itself and took the trajectory of Ethiopian modernity and modernism to a new ideological scene. Without the privilege of mastery, the relation between subjectivity and representation in Ethiopian modernist art and literature oriented itself to an undefined paradigm of a misguided trope of Marxist modernity that instead believed in class subjectivity. Abdurahman Sheriff's perspective as an artist was thwarted by an imposed power relationship that defined the thinking and acting subject as agent of a radical social project to transform society. What was then lost was the cultural production of identity, including artistic identity and poetics, which eventually became ambivalent and uneasy.

Although Abdurahman Sheriff (personal communication, 2009) said that “the government never imposed on the artistic production of students” during his seventeen year directorial tenure, the aesthetic ideology of Marxism was indirectly imposed on artists. Graduation works were scrutinized by committee members chaired by Abdurahman Sheriff, the Director of the School. These members authenticated the revolutionary characteristics of the piece, at times rejecting works that were perceived to have questioned the revolution's authenticity. Artists Bekele Mekonnen and Behailu Bezabih remember the work of student Zena Asfaw who had painted images of a crocodile with two heads, which committee members felt represented a derogatory notion on the revolution.

It is important to note that these graduation works came at a particular juncture in Ethiopian history when things were on the verge of collapse and at a time of historical genocide and trauma. Although artists in the main refrained from producing

the iconic portraits of Marx and Lenin, they were obliged to produce images that were reflective and constitutive of the ideology such as workers and peasants. I consider the concept of Ethiopian 'kitsch' in artworks produced from 1974-1991 in Chapter Four where the artist was forced to become a political subject, only to render even more complex contradictions and crisis to Ethiopian modernism.

An important line of argument in Abdurahman Sheriff's career that is reflective of the intellectual movement is his rethinking of the autonomous subject to class subjectivity and today an advocate of sovereignty in contemporary art, in what is for me the most important framework in the continued fragmentation and limitation of the discourse of Ethiopian modernity and modernism. Abdurahman Sheriff characterizes the modern intellectual movement that was initially enamored with European modernity, but that later retreated to the revolutionary subject that was relativistic, today a reformulated subject that has radically broken away from the logic of a progressing contradiction. Today, Abdurahman Sheriff talks about the importance of the "imagination to a work of art" and that no one should impose 'on the artist's creative sovereignty.' (Sheriff, personal communication, 2009) In 1999, he said:

When we look back at the situation in the last twenty years, we find that we have had a trial of a sort of dictatorship of culture and art during the socialist regime. One cannot really say much about any basic development in the arts during this period. With the fall of the Derg (the military junta) we have definitely left this era behind us. There is certainly a new situation in our country now. Artists who have been working under restrictive conditions in the last two decades, suddenly find themselves in a new and completely unexpected free situation. During the last five years of the newly found liberalization, young artists as well as not the so young ones, are feeling and living this freedom sometimes with a real joy of rebirth. One can do what one likes, and, of course, nobody has the right to interfere, even if one does something improper, whether knowingly or unknowingly. (Sheriff, 1999, p.3)

At issue here is the historical trajectory of Ethiopian modernism and modernity that went from one stage to another without addressing the problematics of each phase of modernity and modernism that the country was challenged with and along with it without a critical scrutiny of the limitations of each phase's Western genealogy. Artists like Abdurahman Sheriff failed to construct the processes of each stage of modernity and modernism that the country went through within the discursive space of its multiplicity and cultural specificity. Abdurahman Sheriff's artistic career is hence reflective of the Ethiopian intellectual's relation to modernity and modernism and its troubling historical narrative. It reflects the lack of a coherent discourse in Ethiopian modernism that has therefore prevented contemporary Ethiopian artists from capturing the contradictory profile of modern art and the dialectical refashioning of indigenous and exogenous practices that encompass all the crises and schisms of their modern world. This manifests itself in the current shallow comprehension of contemporary art which is discussed in Chapter Five.

As argued above, coming to terms with the challenges of modernity that conceptualized the composition and political behavior in the context of Ethiopia had become daunting for intellectuals of the 1950s and 1960s. As exemplified in the texts of *Adefres* and *KeAdmas Bashager*, this early intellectual discourse that clashed between a seemingly Eurocentric progressive and modern motivation on the one hand, and backward, traditional impulses on the other imposed the need for a severe revision in the meaning of the 'modern.' The unconditional capitulation to European social norms led to the failure of early modernism as a movement, exemplified in the disillusioned characters within the texts of *Adefres* and *KeAdmas Bashager* and in artists like Abdurahman Sheriff. Although this new construction of modernist subjectivity that manifested itself in the literature of *Adefres*, *KeAdmas Bashager* and even *Este Teteyeku*, as well as in artists like Gebre Kristos Desta and Abdurahman Sheriff,

attempted to detail the urgency of change, a reevaluation of these modern subjects on the contrary revealed a decentered and fragmented self. This 'self' initially challenged conventional relationships between subject and the external world, but yet later became disillusioned and in some cases existentially incomplete. Importantly, the negotiation of these subjects to the modern world presented a crisis of subjectivity whose inability to achieve subject formation decried the situation of the subject in time and space and the idealized relationship between subject and the collective space.

In later chapters of the literary texts I have mentioned above, and particularly in *Adefres*, the intellectual turns the unsettling uncertainty of complete submission to European modernity to yet another conception of Marxist modernity, a modernity that was wholly amalgamated without the objective realities of the country. Marxism-Leninism's progressive moral appeal hence framed a simulacrum space of Marxist political and social thought. Marxist categories pervaded the discourse in the works of these literary modernists and in artists like Abdurahman Sheriff. As the Director of the School, Abdurahman Sheriff became the undisputed authority of revolutionary art, although today he gives a disclaimer to that. Characters in the literary texts also invoke the concept of class and class struggle, although Marxism's status as a theory of social and historical change is largely unaddressed. For instance, Dagnachew Worku's *Adefres* portrays student activism that stays away from the particularities of politics and history. It was nevertheless this same movement that ironically takes the life of the main character Adefres, as if signifying the futility of the project. This same movement of the '50s and '60s, which was full of idealism and disillusionment, and of experimentation and anxiety, culminated in the revolution of 1974. Critical thinking about the meaning of the 'modern' that included the shifting and overlapping ideas of class, gender, ethnicity, and nation which are essential for interpreting cultural and

social history, and that should have linked and simultaneously distinguished it from other histories and other modernities, was obscured.

The corpus of ideas that is imbued in Marxism proved to be influential to the intellectual who most emphatically yearned for modernity and all of its promises. Abdurahman Sheriff characterized this trope of intellectual at the time. The popularity of the Russian revolution and its ability to present an alternative discourse of detours to modernity, distinct in its anti-capitalist and collectivist orientation offered an interpretation that extended to social facets of Ethiopian society. Donham (1999, p.126) said:

What Marxism came to mean in Ethiopia has to be understood in the context of local history. To Ethiopians the meaning of Marxism was contained. I shall argue, not so much in philosophy or in its utopian vision of human fulfillment—themes familiar in western Marxism but in a story of how weak and backward collection of nationalities, located outside of western Europe, attained unity, wealth and international respect: the story of the Russian revolution. As in the China described by Levenson, Marxism organized historical feelings in such a way that it promised or appeared to promise, a way of cutting history off at the pass.

Paradoxically, the intellectual's intense urge for change and progress within the promised benefits of modernity became disoriented and dangerous when the revolution got hijacked by a military Marxist junta that initially reverberated the rhetorics of the intellectual, but that later imprisoned the whole country in shackles. It is necessary to conceptualize these factors within the thought process of literary intellectuals and artists like Abdurahman Sheriff, whose trajectory went from Expressionism to a socialist dictated form of aesthetics and currently to a more contemporary approach to art, if one is to analyze the particular constellation and essential characteristics from which Ethiopian modernism derives and continues to exist.

I have attempted to show in this chapter the paradox and ambiguity of Ethiopian modernity and modernism at its inception, and the problematic trajectory that it has taken in the literary and visual arts. It is critical that the intellectual landmark and crisis of consciousness within the climate of Ethiopian culture, arts and philosophy be reconstructed to periodize, map or narrate the context of Ethiopian modernity and modernism.

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## Chapter 4

### The Allegory of ‘Kitsch’ Artistic Production in Ethiopia (1974-1991)

*Art which is always an integral part of any ideology had been influenced to serve the purpose of new change in all societies. Being under the influence of the Ethiopian revolution, the visual arts of present day Ethiopia are not far from this truth. Its role in social transformation is immense and effective Therefore, the discussion concerning the ideological aspect of the study will be in the lesser degree than the administrative and management aspects of the art of the new era, for the latter determines the former. (Wolde, 1980, p.11)*

A graduate of Moscow State University, an art critic, an educator in the Fine Art School, and an art juror during the Derg<sup>48</sup> regime, Seyum Wolde believed in the mutual attachment of art and ideology and played to be an important interlocutor for the

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<sup>48</sup> The Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army, or the Derg (Committee), was formed in June 1974 by military officers following a mutiny by the military against the Emperor Haile Selassie. The number of committee members was originally 120 but the number decreased later as some members were expelled or killed. Mengistu Hailemariam was its chair. In July, the Derg gained major concessions from the Emperor Haile Selassie including the power to arrest not only military officers, but government officials at which time the Prime Minister Aklilu Habtewold was imprisoned along with most of their cabinets and many senior military officers. In August, after a proposed constitution creating a constitutional monarchy was presented to the Emperor, the Derg began a program of dismantling the imperial government. The Derg deposed and imprisoned the Emperor in September 1974. The committee renamed itself the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) and took control of the government. The Derg chose Lieutenant General Aman Andom as its chairman and acting head of state. However, General Aman Andom did not agree with the radical elements in the Derg over the issue of a new military offensive in Eritrea. General Aman Andom was removed from power and executed along with supporters and 60 officials of the previous Imperial government. Brigadier General Taffari Banti became the new Chairman of the Derg and head of state, with Mengistu Hailemariam as his vice-Chairman. The monarchy was formally abolished in May, 1975, and Marxism-Leninism was proclaimed the ideology of the state. Emperor Haile Selassie died in August 1975. General Taffari Banti was also killed, and Mengistu gained undisputed leadership of the Derg. In 1987 the Derg was formally dissolved and the country became the People’s Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Many of the Derg members remained in key government posts, and remained as the members of the Central Committee and Politburo of the Workers Party. Mengistu became Secretary General of the WPE, President of the PDRE, while remaining Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces.

promotion of revolutionary art during the years of 1974-1991. While Abdurahamn Sheriff served as the Director of the School during the entire regime of the Derg, Seyum Wolde was the school's master theoretician.

For artists Bekele Mekonnen, Geta Mekonnen and Behailu Bezabih who were students at the Fine Art School during the revolution, Seyum Wolde's official standard of art was nevertheless rebuked by many artists in often mediated forms of artistic efforts that did not concern itself with Wolde's direct and conventional sentimentalism to revolutionary art. Instead, the majority of artistic production from this period had a creative edge that hinged on the vernacular, that triggered broad acceptance from mass culture and that validated shared sensibilities. Revolutionary Ethiopia had also re-defined the nation's past construction in order to justify the state of the present. Historical memory was used to constitute a nation-state with the State deploying different mechanisms to control that memory, so as to enhance and legitimate its power. The focus of this chapter is to discuss opposing trajectories of memory in the construction of cultural history within the narratives of the formation of the Marxist Ethiopian nation-state and its impact on Ethiopian modernism. I will principally look into the production of art that was supposed to follow a determinate conception of creativity, power's associated rhetoric, styles of pedagogy, and forms of response by artists, as well as into the cultural implications that had become a necessary starting point to negotiate our artistic capacities today.

This period is the third part of the triangulation of Ethiopian modernity that I discussed in the introductory chapter, which is after the shock of the Italian invasion and the collapse of global colonialism when modernism and modernity had radically shifted from previous perspectives. This period of Ethiopian modernity and modernism took an uncompromising stand towards amalgamating another version of European ideology that confined Ethiopian history into a web of ambiguities. The notion that

modern European scholars have engaged in the search for the ‘self,’ as is in Marxist theory, is a critical common place. For non-Europeans, the challenge was to transform this ideology to make it capable of constructing a definition that was subject to the limitations and dynamics of non-Western societies. Yet, the Ethiopian state’s ability to affect the making of Ethiopian modernity through Marxian ideology by articulating its people’s interests was instead permanently subjected to power’s defected Marxist rhetoric and demagoguery.

1974-1991 was a period in Ethiopian history when things were on the verge of collapse and was a time of historical genocide. Ethiopian modernism performed a chronicle of loss, emerging as an unconscious collective memory with allegorical meanings to an epoch in crisis. Ethiopian artists in the main during this period refrained from producing the iconic portraits of Marx and Lenin unless it was directly imposed by the State for certain propaganda purposes, which was sometimes the case. Instead, their points of entry generally examined the recurrence of myth in past history or a superficial photographic realism of socialist ideology that was presented without passion or anger, but that addressed the official ideology of the State. Both kinds of works poised a different kind of agency in the creation of images that not only were reflective and constitutive of the period, but that also appealed to the past. The only problem was that the past was romantic and sentimental and reified mythology. The main interest in this chapter is hence to decode this period of Ethiopian modernism through an analysis of the artistic production that proliferated during the years of 1974-1991.

I believe that the artworks produced during this period are aligned with the normative Western taxonomy of ‘kitsch,’ an adversary to high art. It was ‘kitsch’ because it communicated to the masses. From a basis of aesthetics, and since there is no strategy for using a formula of aesthetics, ‘kitsch’ can nevertheless be argued to have a

fully matured cultural tradition with a source of pleasure for its audience. ‘Kitsch’ and beauty are in the eyes of the beholder. The rupture between art and ‘kitsch’ is derived from our aesthetic approach to our surrounding and what we believe aesthetics to be. Why should aesthetics not be communicative to a larger audience? Why should it limit itself to only those who are supposedly ‘refined’? These are questions that I will deliberate upon in this chapter. Western art historical tradition dictates that art is contemplative while ‘kitsch’ is fleetingly charged, i.e. it is an image of the moment.

Whether an object is ‘kitsch’ nevertheless implicates a consideration of purpose and context. From this perspective, this chapter will investigate the production of art at this juncture of Ethiopian history and will interrogate Ethiopian subjectivity, which includes memory and materiality as central concepts in the production of art. Within this perception of subjectivity, I will also look into the contentious term of ‘kitsch’ as an important performative text in Ethiopia’s artistic production during the country’s long flirtation with Marxism as ‘kitsch’ that mimicked the avant-garde. “Kitsch by its very nature,” said Calinescu (1987, p.231), “is incapable of taking the risk involved in any true avant-gardism.” This chapter will, on the contrary, interrogate an avant-gardism which was in conflict with an imposed civilization that the subject did not know and refused to amalgamate into his/her existence.

### ***Ethiopian Artistic Production from 1974-1991: Socialist Realism?***

Before going into an analysis of why I have categorized the production of Ethiopian art during the years of 1974 to 1991 as ‘kitsch,’ it is important to frame the context of the discourse that outlined the artistic production of the period. Like many African countries of the time, Ethiopia was part of the Cold War battalion. The battleground of the Cold War was in Africa where both the United States and the Soviet Union structured a covert East and West struggle battled by proxy, turning allies into

warriors on their behalf. Across Africa, the forces of capitalism and communism staged coups and revolutions and fueled rivalries with ‘aid and assistance.’ It was on these African distant battlefields that the war was fought. Although the trajectory of Ethiopian ‘leftism,’<sup>49</sup> which was explained in Chapter Three, is unique in its nature, the regime of 1974-91, which hijacked the Ethiopian left’s revolutionary effort, was a surrogate for this same contention between East and West. In Ethiopia, scholarship in art was barely developing in 1974 when Marxism-Leninism denounced the ‘modern’ in art as ‘bourgeois’ and ‘decadent’. No crisis had been so profound to the trajectories of arts and culture than the introduction of the Derg’s Marxism to Ethiopian history. The historical dialectic moved through the class struggle; the class that represented the negation of the past was the privileged agent of history. The ‘revolutionary’ theorist became the historian, and historicism reinstated a conception of history as a single narrative within a totalizing framework and a distinct emphasis on a flawed ideology of Marxism as the legitimate hermeneutics.

Socialist Realism, as an ideology enforced by the Soviet state as the official standard for art, ambiguously defined the production of art in the country. Cultural critics at the time suggested concrete approaches to creativity that depicted the revolution. For instance, in his book *The Cultural Situation in Socialist Ethiopia*, Aleme Eshete (1982, p.22) stated:

Pre-revolutionary art exhibitions included works of high artistic quality, executed according to the latest international standard techniques. However, our famous artists of the past had little or no sense of ‘artistic responsibility’ to society. None of them played a role of edification or

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<sup>49</sup> Ethiopian leftism started with the Ethiopian Student Movement that I describe in Chapter 3. The Ethiopian Student Movement was largely responsible to the establishment of the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON). MEISON joined the Derg during the early days but later had a falling out. The EPRP continued to work against the Derg until the early 1990s. Most of the onslaught of killing and genocide was conducted against the EPRP since it had mobilized the majority of the youth who worked in underground movements in the major cities of Ethiopia.

tried to improve the unjust conditions of the oppressed masses. Realist or abstract, they all painted either for psychic gratification or for the local or international market. Ethiopian painting was an elitist art that was aimed at the rich-feudal bourgeois magnates, diplomatic or international circles, the wealthy tourists and, in a few cases, the stock markets of the advanced capitalist world. The masses of peasants and workers were alien to most of our artists. With the outbreak of the revolution, the struggle to introduce its ideals into the fine arts was long and lively. Painting and sculpture, as well as other forms of art, were supposed to serve the revolution and advance its cause. The revolutionary painter does not accept to be a slave of the market. He does not paint only to sell and enrich himself. Painting, for the revolutionary artist, is an arm in the struggle of the oppressed. A number of exhibitions have held in post-revolutionary years where the works of art shown have spoken the language of the revolution and heralded the cry of the masses. These works of art were executed by young revolutionary artists like Tadesse Mesfin and Eshetu Tiruneh who had lived in oblivion during the last regime with their works piled up in their 'tukuls.'<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, the 'revolutionary democracy' of the state professed Soviet type Marxism-Leninism as its ideology and propagated revolutionary art vis a vis Soviet style socialism. Artists like Eshetu Tiruneh<sup>51</sup> and Tadesse Mesfin<sup>52</sup> that Aleme Eshete mentioned above were sent to the U.S.S.R for further education. The extent to which Ethiopian 'revolutionaries' incorporated ideas about Marxist aesthetics and culture in their theories and practices is nevertheless debatable as the situation only encouraged facile and reductive slogans that responded to a historical condition of existence and experience. How did Marxist aesthetics coincide with the most repressive moment of

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<sup>50</sup> Tukuls are huts made of thatched grass and serve as houses for millions of Ethiopians.

<sup>51</sup> Eshetu studied at the State Academic Institute of Art in Moscow for his MFA. He embraced the anti-imperialist struggle of the Ethiopian Student Movement that led to the revolution of 1974. His graduation work from the Fine Art School was on the Ethiopian famine of 1974. His work is mainly realism with different depictions of heroic figures and portrayals of his country through different symbolisms. He has worked in the Ministry of Culture for many years as the Coordinator of Cultural Policy research. He has recently opened an Art School in Addis Ababa.

<sup>52</sup> Tadesse graduated from the Addis Ababa School of Fine Arts and went for further education to the Academy of Fine Arts in Leningrad. He was a member of the Communist Party during the Derg. He is currently lecturer at the Fine Art School.

Ethiopian history? Perhaps what was most disturbing was the State's attempt to replicate the politics and language of Marxist aesthetics in its endeavor to solidify its tyrannical power. Hence, the importance of partially and selectively discussing an otherwise broad and divergent subject matter of Marxist aesthetics so as to be able to understand its incongruence to the mainstay of the Ethiopian State's propaganda during the period of inquiry.

It is also important to discuss some features of socialist realism as it pertained to the Soviet Union since the regime was supposedly motivated by the Soviet Revolution and since many artists went for further education to the U.S.S.R. In 1976, the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School revised its curriculum based on socialist ideology. It was then that the school was also partitioned into the three divisions of painting, sculpture and graphics. The school was also transferred from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Culture. The policies of the Ministry of Culture therefore dictated the administration and forms of pedagogy of the school. It should be noted that the Ministry of Culture was then an institution that authorized the modes of culture that should proliferate in the country and the ones that should be vetoed. The Fine Art School was expected to perform within this license of the ministry. The question of how the ideology of socialist realism fared in artistic production therefore also becomes pertinent.

The broad ideology of Marxist aesthetics and its critical theory for the dialectic of 20<sup>th</sup> Century social forms itself takes divergent hermeneutics in Marxist aesthetic philosophy. Marxist interpretation on aesthetics is open-ended whereby theorists like Adorno, Lukacs and Brecht have given variegated interpretations. "The legacy of Western Marxism," said Terry Eagleton (1990, p.3), "from Lukacs to Adorno allots to art a theoretical privilege surprising at first glance for a materialist current of thought." The relation of worker to the object of labor is a central theme of Marxian philosophy.

In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx described work as man's vital activity, man's spiritual essence and his human essence. By shaping the object, man transforms his environment and his relations. Work is not only to satisfy man's needs but also to change the world even in play, in the creativity of art. In this work, Marx said that art is the highest form of activity for man that animals cannot possibly attain.

Animals produce only when immediate physical needs compels them to do so while man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need-hence man also produces in accordance with the laws of beauty. (Marx & Engels, 1988, p.55)

For Marx, it is only immediate consumption and immediate desire that is unfree and human beings can shy away from desire to attain the realm of freedom. Such economic activity is nevertheless in the service of natural needs and is hence not completely free. A fuller and higher freedom is attained when man does not have to fulfill material needs, but when economics becomes just an end in itself. Economic work, therefore, is on a continuum with free artistic creation.

The attainment of higher awareness through art had nevertheless a conflicting interpretation even among Marxism's early followers, between the 1920s Russian avant-garde called the Constructivists and the 1930s Stalinists called the Socialist Realists. In his book *The Total Art of Stalinism*, Boris Groys (2003, p.58) said that earlier Soviet avant-garde movements such as Suprematism and Futurism paved the way for Constructivism and later Socialist Realism, where components of utopian life dominated the ideological paradigm of all these movements. He nevertheless said that the ideology of the early avant-garde movements such as Suprematism and Futurism, was distinct from the socially-oriented tendencies of Constructivism and 'productivism' of the 1920s. The new generation of Constructivist artists claimed the roles of

engineers, agitators and construction workers. The Constructivists rejected artistic inspirations and believed that they should only make processes and constructs of which Leon Trotsky (2005) said: “To reject art as a means of picturing and imaging knowledge because of one's opposition to the contemplative and impressionistic bourgeois art of the last few decades, is to strike from the hands of the class which is building a new society its most important weapon.” Groys has argued that the Constructivists nevertheless inspired an avant-gardism of creative work contrary to Socialist Realism’s tendency to utilize art to a political effect. The full emergence of Socialist Realism signified the demise of the avant-garde as a philosophical and aesthetic system and meant the end of the avant-garde. In describing Soviet art from the revolutionary period, Boris Groys (2003, p.58) has said:

The relation between art and power may, in fact, be the main theme in art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But with the exception of Germany in the 1930s, this relation was nowhere else as confused, ambiguous, and telling as in Russia during this period. The Soviet state understood itself as an avant-garde of mankind on its way into the communist future. The Soviet population had to be constantly on the move, constantly mobilized, inspired and oriented towards utopian ideals. It had no right to stop, to relax, to look toward the past. In this sense, official Soviet art was also utopian, avant-garde art, because its main task was to visualize the communist future in order to inspire the Soviet people on the road to utopia.

Groys was discussing the aesthetic intentionality and the pragmatic didacticism of Soviet Socialist Realist art. While the Ethiopian State dictated socialist realism, it should be noted that different artists in these socialist countries who followed the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the U.S.S.R took different approaches to tackle the official art discourse of the State. In Ethiopia, theorists like Seyum Wolde and Aleme Eshete reverberated the importance of Soviet style revolution and the artistic production of socialist realism. Nevertheless, socialist realism as an ideology never took root much

less in artistic production. Despite Aleme Eshete's proclamation of artists indulging in the cause of the masses, artists for the most part had no ideological leaning, let alone indulged in socialist realist artistic creativity. On the one hand, the theorists themselves lacked the breadth of intellectual thought to subordinate the ideology to a consistent framework of Ethiopian society that contextualized the political questions that the theory arose to address.

It is also fair to say that although the State pontificated socialist realism, it was only Seyum Wolde, and to some extent Aleme Eshete, who made an attempt to articulate the function of revolutionary art. On the other hand, the sheer cruelty of the regime, which consistently killed and imprisoned its countrymen, contributed to the disgust of its citizens and hence to the exclusion of the broad populace from the State's hegemonic ideology. Thousands were slaughtered in a violent political campaign called the 'Red Terror'<sup>53</sup> and bloody Stalinist purges against so called reactionaries who did not support the revolution, as the huge sculptures of the Lion of Judah were replaced by even more massive monuments of Vladimir Lenin in the major squares of Addis Ababa for onlookers' amazement. The majority of onlookers were introduced to Vladimir Lenin by party Chairman Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam<sup>54</sup> whose images in the public spaces also had become equivalent to Lenin's. The hammer and sickle, the symbol of unity, absolute truth and the representation of struggle became an emblem in public spaces. Millions were dying of famine while the government was too busy with the propaganda of its revolution. Far from socialist realism, the production of art from the

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<sup>53</sup> Mengistu officially began his campaign with a speech in Revolution Square which included the words "Death to counterrevolutionaries and death to the EPRP." He produced three bottles of what appeared to be blood and smashed them to the ground to show what the revolution would do to its enemies. A massive house-by-house search for EPRP members was conducted. Thousands of men and women were rounded up and executed. .

<sup>54</sup> Colonel Mengistu ruled the country from 1975-1991 as President and as Worker's Party Chair. He fled to Zimbabwe when the EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front) took over the government through armed struggle in 1991. The EPRDF has attempted to have Mengistu extradited to face justice for the tens of thousands of killings and imprisonment that he is responsible for. It is nevertheless unlikely that he would be extradited as long as Mugabe is in power.

years 1974-91 thus reflected the Ethiopian subject's interiority and the enduring impact of an imported ideology.

Artists' version of aesthetics during this turbulent period instead attempted to demonstrate ambivalence to the political aesthetics that was demanded of them. The production of art in Ethiopia hence created its own agency in articulating its own environment. While the regime wanted to portray Marxist-Leninist ideals, artists who were disillusioned by the regime's revolution instead produced works that were repetitive, monotonous and melancholic. This brings me abreast to a realm that pays tribute to 'kitsch' in all its forms where artistic expressions of sentiment and melancholia betrayed 'kitsch's' normative nature of brashness and insolence.

### ***Kitsch and Modernism***

I contend that what is considered as banal in the construction of modernist aesthetics is highly strategic and leaves out a range of cultural specific subjectivities. Although African modernists continue to challenge the imposition of modernism's crisis and schisms, and even as critical perspectives continue to thrive, the discourse of the European 'sublime' and its enlightened sacramental moments continue to be part of African artistic discourse and production. Can we talk about a totalizing effect of the European 'sublime' without considering the grey and dust of modernity that has created chaos and pandemonium to African subjectivity? Can we even talk about African 'kitsch' within a discourse framed by Western discourse? What anyway, is 'kitsch'?

Modernism's crusade for novelty has posited 'kitsch' as redundant and corrupt, cheap and crude, and a pseudo art that is instantly identifiable, existing only as a sentimental imagery to cajole its viewer and consumer. Originally entrenched in the process of industrialization and mechanical reproduction within a genre of imitation and replication, 'kitsch' had been identified as lacking originality. Artists and critics

have mulled over its shallow sentiments in contrast to the moral edifications that came through high art. Categories of pedestrian sentiments of 'kitsch' and lack of originality and progress have been structured outside multiple aesthetic sensibilities as well as multiple cultural and ideological boundaries. It had been instead structured within an opportunistic text that glorifies modernism's notion of authenticity and that presupposes a decisive presence or absence in artistic receptivity. This authenticity of modernism ignores multiple modernities that were formed in the space and time of the colonial interphase. The vulgarity of 'kitsch' was no where more pronounced than in Clement Greenberg's 1939 seminal essay, *Avant-garde and Kitsch*. Although Greenberg's formalist posture has since been criticized and challenged in its idiosyncratic historical conception of modernism, his condemnation of 'kitsch' popularized and coined this provocative word in conceptions of modernism.

Greenberg insisted on the qualitative distinctness of advanced art and the avant-garde as that historical agent that kept culture alive in the age of capitalism. The essay came out in the spirit of a socialist discourse that believed in the political role of art and literature. According to Greenberg, the mouthpiece of socialism is the avant-garde artist, who is the sole protector of culture and who marries content to form. In a peculiar interpretation of art in the age of socialism, Greenberg believed in the 'purity' of art that can elevate the taste of the masses. For Greenberg, 'kitsch' was hence equated to low culture, an 'art of the masses' and an adulteration to modernist innovations that corrupts 'high art' and that was easily consumed by its viewer. The logical irony then, is this dichotomy between high art and popular art, between those who are trained to perceive and understand 'art' and those plebeians whose mental faculties are supposedly devoid from that entry.

In defense of purity, Greenberg excluded the natural, the political, the playful and the anarchic avant-garde. He overlooked and marginalized various avant-garde

developments constitutive of modernity and everyday life. How does the creative world account this daily stream of experience associated with modernity and its disorder? One could argue that Greenberg's obsession with the purity of art emanated from fascism's unapologetic sentimentalization of aesthetics, its idealization of death and its glorified version of heroism in the faces of destruction. The year was 1939 and one could argue that Greenberg's Jewish background facilitated his concern over fascism's totalitarian appropriation of modernism through brutal destruction. It was a time where 'kitsch' in its physicality and its appeal to mass consensus, which was a typical characteristic of fascism, became the art of fascism. Whether fascism's brutality exacerbated Greenberg's persistence of opulence in art is not at issue here. At issue here, and what I am most interested in this chapter, is art's essential attribute of soothing and reassuring its viewer and consumer, rather than its edifice of elitist enlightenment.

### ***Ethiopian Kitsch: 1974-1991***

My categorization of Ethiopian art during the years of 1974 to 1991 into the taxonomy of 'kitsch' requires a theoretical framework since my argument lies in the conceptualization of 'kitsch' within the wider analysis of its social context rather than meanings it might be said to possess inherently and autonomously. To that process, I will deliberate on the intellectual thought of two seemingly analogous philosophers, Walter Benjamin and Achille Mbembe who I believe have reflected on this aesthetic category by problematising modernism's formalist and antiquarian fixation of art that is often devoid of cultural and political considerations. Moreover, what is interesting to my research is these two thinkers' perception of the subject's experience in an alienated society and the concept of aesthetics as experienced by the subject in such a society. Mulling over two contrasting sites of capitalism and its postcolony, the context of Walter Benjamin's and Achille Mbembe's works not only informs my research of

‘kitsch,’ but also reads thoroughly the widely heterogeneous and divergent experiences of modernity. Both open up a new and an uncontested terrain for different ways of interpreting bourgeois aesthetic historicity and sensibility.

I am categorizing Ethiopian art from 1974-1991 as ‘kitsch’ primarily because I am mostly interested in the experience of the subject and his/her interaction with their milieu. The mediation between subject and object is key to this analysis. The simultaneous lust of desire that is chronicled in the artworks, such as the glory of past heroes and the shock of perception of the present, the positive optimism of utopia and a negative present, is what is fascinating. This dialectical image in its fixedness and transcendence compels me to realize a paradigm of thinking that frames the dialectical thinking of subjectivity and its objects. Furthermore, the aestheticization of politics that appeals to the mass brings to doubt the perceptual experience and cognition of aesthetics that finds itself in a tradition engaged with loftiness. The artworks performed during this period were far from what the Western canon considers to be haughty, that element of art that should supposedly be tall and soaring and that only a few are lucky enough to comprehend. Talking about Walter Benjamin’s thought within the aestheticization of politics in the wake of fascism Susan Buck-Morss (1992, p.5) said:

If we were really to ‘politicize art’ in the radical way he (Benjamin) is suggesting, art would cease to be art as we know it. Moreover, the key term ‘aesthetics’ would shift its meaning one hundred and eighty degrees. ‘Aesthetics’ would be transformed, indeed redeemed, so that, ironically or dialectically it would describe the field in which the antidote to fascism is deployed as a political response.

Buck-Morss was saying that if this concept of interpreting aesthetics as a political response is allowed to develop, it will change the entire conceptual order of modernity. Indeed, the history of Western art along with the art market and cultural institutions has not accounted for a materialist art historical practice that would have

elucidated the domain of art with all other social phenomena. Instead, a canonical theory of pleasure with conventional hierarchies of value that disguises the contradictions in cultural phenomena and that privileges a few while discounting the majority remains to be the hegemonic discourse. I am therefore bringing forth for contemplation the conceptualization of aesthetics itself that sanctions the dominance of one form of sensibility to another, where one form of art is considered superior while another is marginalized to be banal. Moreover, aesthetics as a political response is what I am most interested in this chapter. The subject in Ethiopian modernism's history from 1974-1991 was the source of history and 'kitsch' exuded the complexity of the event and the political power that lay behind its very existence.

As Buck-Morss said (1992), Walter Benjamin's mass-mediated modernity complicated the dominant understanding of vernacular culture and mass reproductive technologies in a turn that was contrary to modernism's definition of what constituted good art. He was the first to open up new parameters in the intellectual reception of mass culture and mass culture's variant manifestations such as 'kitsch' and hence my interest in his works. I bring Achille Mbembe into discourse because the taxonomies inherited from traditional Western art histories are even more problematic when African art is analyzed, traded and exhibited. Modernism's vision of the moral life continues to filter itself into the pedagogy of African cultural institutions and value judgments, and African imaginative expression exists within this context of problematical epistemic contradictions. It is from this perspective that I find Achille Mbembe interesting, as he tries to show new concepts of discourse that are necessary to encapsulating the complexities of African life.

My reading of Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* is centered on his essay entitled *The Aesthetics of Vulgarities*. I find the chapter on the *Aesthetics of Vulgarities* as his most important intervention that deals with the African subject's interaction with power

which is largely relevant to my analysis of 'kitsch.' It is from the perspective of Benjamin's and Mbembe's analysis of the subject that is the subject's interaction with cultural, social and political dynamics, that I want to consider the concept of Ethiopian 'kitsch' in artworks from 1974-1991 as 'kitsch' that was not aware of itself.

One could argue that it was the same fear of fascism Greenberg associated with that was also part of Walter Benjamin's various essays, and specifically his art essays that contended the power of technology, which he said changed the character of art and culture in the era of capitalism. Benjamin feared fascism's ethnic exceptionalism as well as its destructive armaments, its war and its imperialistic mongering. Yet, contrary to Greenberg's exclusionary theory, Benjamin discussed the crisis of aesthetics within a larger theory and history of culture that recognized the conditions of possibility for 'post-auratic' forms of experience and memory. Unlike many of his colleagues and contemporaries who saw the danger of mass culture, Benjamin understood nineteenth century capitalism and historicism quite differently and he argued not only for mass productions' progressive potentials, but also for the relationship between fine art and mass culture to a critique of both. Susan Buck-Morss (as cited in Kester, 1997) once said:

I take seriously Walter Benjamin's thesis in the "Artwork" essay on the liquidation of art. He is quite insistent that art as we know it is coming to an end ----It is not just a question of the loss of "aura" of the artwork. Benjamin is arguing that by the mid-twentieth century making art in the bourgeois sense is no longer tenable. Bourgeois art has always been a commodity, bought and sold on the market, so the commodification of art is not the point. His argument is, rather, that the technological conditions of production have so thoroughly blurred the boundary between "art" and cultural objects generally that its special, separate status cannot be maintained.

Let me hence begin to critically engage with the taxonomy of Ethiopian 'kitsch.' "Seyum Wolde's fundamental principles of socialist realism," said Geta Mekonnen (2007, p.33), "were applied in the Fine Arts School. Rules and guidelines were issued regarding the training of art students as well as strict procedures to direct the production of graduation works by final year students." Mekonnen stated that a list of criteria was issued to the creation of socialist art. They were:

- 1) Glorification of the proletarian struggle and its achievements
- 2) Patriotism and heroes of the revolution, and the military defending the mother land.
- 3) Socialist farmers engaged in communal work, the equality of women and women at work or as mothers
- 4) Humanity defined by work and depictions of people at work
- 5) Historical heroes and martyrs of the people in anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggle
- and 6) Depiction of cultural festivities and the cultural life of marginalized societies and ethnic groups. Students were required to work only from the list and choices from the top of the list were encouraged. (Mekonnen, 2007, p.33)

Artist Geta Mekonnen, who was a student at the Fine Art School during the revolution, has said that "artists feared the aesthetic ideology that the state had imposed at that time mainly because they saw death and destruction around them in the name of the ideology." (Mekonnen, personal communication, May, 2009) Although the state sanctioned the production of art in such a way that Geta Mekonnen described above, artists, on the contrary, produced works with inscriptions of melancholia, sentimentality and figurative work; all typical aversions of the European concept of 'kitsch,' but in the Ethiopian context were the allegorical expressions of life in a historical juncture of Ethiopian modern history. I focus my research on mainly graduation works since there were no exhibitions in public spaces unless sanctioned by the State. The few exhibitions that were conducted were produced by the State and constituted similar types of works to the graduation works. There were also no private galleries. Moreover,

readily available works from the period for researchers and scholars are completely nonexistent. One is therefore confined to graduation works that are in the archives of the Fine Art School. Here, it is also important to note that there were many poster arts that were demanded of students for propaganda purposes that are also found in the archives, although nothing has been written about these works. Poster arts (see Figures 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3) reflected similar propaganda themes of workers and peasants and iconic figures of the revolution. Slogans of the revolution like ‘Workers of the World Unite’ also inundated these posters.



Figure 4.1 Poster art, unknown artist, *Development*, date unknown, courtesy of the School of Fine Art and Design, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa



Figure 4.2 Poster art, unknown artist, *Art for Peace* (with hammer and sickle insert)  
date unknown, courtesy of the School of Fine Art and Design, Addis Ababa University,  
Addis Ababa



Figure 4.3 Poster art, *Revolutionary soldiers with background images of Emperors Tewodros and Menelik II*, unknown artist, date unknown, courtesy of the School of Fine Art and Design, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa

The graduation works, which were mainly paintings on canvases, were academic art, and by nature these works are often seen by the West in terms of being ‘kitsch.’ These productions nevertheless resorted to subjects and images that recognized history and reflected the sensibilities of the era. Here, it is important to note that artists engaged in works involving what Geta Mekonnen (personal communication, June 2009) has called “ambiguous subject matters that were preferred by many conscientious yet cautious students.” “It is not a coincidence,” Geta Mekonnen said further (ibid), “that most of the heroes chosen by the most talented students were martyrs.”

Hence, artists like Haregwa Zeru (see Figure 4.4) painted Taytou, Menelik II’s heroic wife who played a pivotal role at the Battle of Adwa. Membere Yosef painted Mengistu Neway, the leader of the 1960 failed coup-d’etat against the Emperor Haile-Selassie. Bekele Haile (see Figure 4.5) and Fikru Gebre Mariam painted Menelik at the Battle of Adwa.<sup>55</sup> Mulugeta Tafesse worked on Emperor Tewodros <sup>56</sup>and Belachew Bekure-Tsion and Mesfin Habte Mariam on Abune Petros (see Figure 4.6) who was slaughtered by the Italian Fascists during the Italian occupation. Artists Bekele Mekonnen and Behailu Bezabih (personal communication, June, 2009) said that “this was the safest way where artists got out from imposed restrictions by the state. Working on martyrs and heroes satisfied the regime while keeping intact the integrity of the artist who feared his/her capitulation to an ideology that he/she did not believe in.” Bezabih, who graduated in 1980, did his final graduation work on *yekolo temari* (traditional church students) called *Wode Dima*, and Bekele Mekonnen, a sculptor, who graduated in 1983, produced a work called *Wugagan* (dawn), a sculpture of a family member.

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<sup>55</sup> The Battle of Adwa was when Menelik II defeated the Italian’s attempt to invade Ethiopia. This battle is symbolic in that a black nation was able to defend itself and drive attempted conquest away at the height of European colonial aggression in Africa. This is elaborated in Chapter One.

<sup>56</sup> Emperor Tewodros committed suicide in the Battle of Maqdala, also elaborated in Chapter One.



Figure 4.4 Haregwa Zeru, *Empress Taytou*, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 42 in., courtesy of the School of Fine Art and Design, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa



Figure 4.5 Bekele Haile, *Menelik II at the Battle of Adwa*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 33 x 30 ½ in., courtesy of the School of Fine Art and Design, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa



Figure 4.6 Belachew Bekure-Tsion, *Abune Petros*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 49 x 46 in., courtesy of the School of Fine Art and Design, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa

Given these works, how does Benjamin's thought translate in artistic production in Ethiopia? Was artistic production intentionally designed to gravitate in its creative choices? Did the intended choices promise accessibility, virtually on first contact, for the largest numbers of untutored viewers? Was artistic production during this period 'genuine' art in conceptions of the West's genuineness? Did it instead exploit stereotypes, legible patterns and other easily recognizable forms to make it easy for the untutored viewer? Was it too easy to be the real thing or was it just 'kitsch' or pseudo-art? These are questions that indeed necessitate the coming into discourse the concepts of historical, political and aesthetical montage of mass culture that becomes critical to my analysis of 'kitsch.' It is essential because one should understand the heterogeneity of historical knowledge where in different moments in history subjects participate in their own way to constitute images of history, aesthetics and politics. Walter Benjamin has talked about the intense physicality of play between subject and commodity, which is that banal artifact of capitalism that is most intriguing to my query. What is important for analysis is the individual and the social experience translated through the artifice of the commodity, the commodity considered as 'kitsch.'

Benjamin has spoken on these objects from the perspective of an industrially adjusted society and its impingement on the human sensorial. He has challenged and interrogated the historicity of a bourgeois interior form of aesthetic sensibility in an era of high capitalism and its accessories, such as war, economic crisis and mass media.

The masses positively require from the work of art (which for them has its place in the circle of consumer items) something that is warming. Here the flame most readily kindled is that of hatred. Its heat however, burns or sears without providing the 'heart's ease' which qualifies art for consumption. Precisely within the consecrated forms of expression, therefore, kitsch and art stand irreconcilably opposed. But for developing living forms, what matters is that they have within them something stirring, useful. Ultimately heartening...that they take kitsch dialectically up into themselves, and hence bring themselves near to the masses while yet surmounting the kitsch. Today perhaps film alone is

equal to this task... or at any rate, more ready for it than any other form.  
(Benjamin, 2002, p.395)

It is from this perspective Benjamin stated above that I will also look into these images where Ethiopian artists were challenging the State's attempt to erase the relationship between the present and the past. Many graduation works were comprised of heroic figures who played important roles in Ethiopian history. Through these works, artists showed a longing for the past and its glory as if they were melancholic for a sense of place and time and of redemption from the past. The State allowed these images of the past because they represented a certain symbolism of unity and nation. However, what I would like to argue is that it was another way for the artist/subject to confronting this epochal crisis of citizenship as the impossibility of the present; the present suspended, and through this suspension, stopped or opened the possibility to its limits. One can say that all these works remit back to reconstructed memory rather than to the experience that generated it, evoking an intense experience of sadness or nostalgia that the viewer experiences in a flash.

One could argue that what would have normally been considered as 'kitsch' by Western critics and scholars here performs as imagery that quoted legitimate conceptual points with the appropriation being ironic to the garishness of the regime. In doing this, artists portrayed the fundamental misconception of the State's historical dynamic, criticizing its socialist realist attempt to counter-history and a new historical analysis that was over-absorbed with the present which it diverted and re-created a long history behind. Moreover, these works communicated with the larger public. Their formulaic depictions of identifiable figures like Emperors Tewodros and Menelik, and routine plots like the Battle of Adwa laid down the premise to be easily absorbed by their viewers. It spoon-fed the consumer. It persuaded massive absorption. Unlike what is

called lofty art that required work from its audience and that struggled with ambivalent feelings, this production encouraged its audience to participate.

Here, it is also important to bring into discourse the conflicting interpretations of these images as well. These fleeting images were at once liberating and repressive; liberating because they articulated an epoch and subjectivity in crisis, and repressive because they portrayed ‘false consciousness.’ While I contend that the dichotomy between art and ‘kitsch’ that excludes all sentimental and realistic art from being considered seriously as debatable, I also believe that the pure sensuality of these works, although responding to an epoch in crisis, at times capitulated rather than challenged the present time. Here, ‘false consciousness’ means lacking emancipatory potential. It was consciousness that was melancholic of the time, but it was one that refrained to represent the totality of the time. One was only speaking of the present through an unfulfilled empty time of a mythic history. Images were fleetingly intense, but got continually forgotten since they were images that did not speak for the continuum.

Milan Kundera wrote that what is wrong about ‘kitsch’ is the simplistic way it deals with complex emotions. He said that “kitsch follows two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says how nice to see children running on the grass. The second tear says how nice to be moved together with all mankind with children running on the grass. It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.” (Kundera, 1999, p.271) What Kundera was talking about is the creation of false worlds of escape through space and time. It is true that Ethiopian art during this period doctored itself in an imaginary landscape to attain relief from its surrounding. The past’s claim on the present did not moderate the present in artistic production in Ethiopia and only in the critical gaze of the past can the present redeem itself. Nevertheless, the purpose of art is to concretize the artist’s fundamental view of existence even if temporary.

My argument is that art needed this type of expression as a form of resistance. It was naturalized as part of the artist's gaze on the State. Moreover, it reaffirmed the collective truth. While it may not have measured to the ideals of high modernism, its accessibility and broad sensibility indexed existing desires while simultaneously exposing the relationship between its audience and power. By going back to past glory, it gave relief to souls that were tormented. The critical gaze of the present, that potential of the image that could have salvaged the human experience was nevertheless romantically searching for a past that it could not redeem. If the works became 'kitsch,' it was only because they persisted within a context of romantic sentimentality that was not coherent and that uncritically attempted to redeem the past and not for any other aesthetic weakness or deficiency.

This is why Walter Benjamin's mass-mediated modernity becomes pertinent to my argument where I assert that historical context defines the meaning of creative expression. It is therefore plausible to claim that what is considered 'kitsch' in the West because it is easily identifiable, consumed at multiple sites, appeals to mass culture, is formulaic with routine plots, etc. was lofty in the Ethiopian context. It was indeed lofty in this particular period of the Ethiopian subject's experience of seventeen years of brutality. Hence, the imperativeness to create a new meaning for the normative conceptual order of modernity that discriminates against a materialist art historical practice that does not elucidate the domain of art with all other social phenomena. Benjamin diffused this binary opposition of art and objecthood. His insights foregrounded important subjects for historians of mass culture. One can visualize the banal artifacts of capitalist production, fulfilling wishful images of the collective consciousness and evoking intense magical and ritualistic feelings. Commodities were therefore capitalism's bequeathed objects with the means to express collective dreams.

This is also what is interesting in Ethiopian art of the period in inquiry. The images created a collective consciousness, the condition of the subject within the whole of society, simultaneously expressing a consciousness shared by a plurality of persons within the Ethiopian society. Benjamin's fascination with the collective consciousness, although criticized by some as objectified subjectivity, was his articulation of the subject. The collective has physicality within the space of historical images where it acknowledges and recognizes itself. In Benjamin's work the collective consciousness as a subject is caught in the city's phantasmagoria while at the same time producing its potentials for progress.

Capitalism situates and reduces the autonomous subject within the production process of massification where the dialectical relationship between subject and object is not that of a transcendental subject against the object of capitalist historical reality, but the collective consciousness as a subject and the social materiality of history as object. He conceives this subject through a collective integration of the self. Even as Benjamin talked about the contents of mass culture, that of 'kitsch,' the banal, and the trash, he has done so to emphasize the age of capitalist production placed on the masses and their relation to its aesthetics. He has talked about the social significance of mass culture and its appeal of aesthetics to the collective in its unconscious state. One could hence argue that the 'kitsch' of nineteenth century Paris was depicted as the future image of tyranny or the possibility of the revolutionary need of the present.

The other scenario of Ethiopia's artistic production during the period in question is that while many artists refrained from producing works of socialist novelties, those of the images of Marx, Lenin, Engels or Mao, they alternatively also produced a genre of generic images. Images from this genre compromised to the ideology of the State and depicted farmers, workers, landscapes and, most importantly, social myths that did not intimidate power. Other artists like Bisrat Shebeba and Samuel Sharew (see Figure

4.8 and 4.9) worked on themes of workers and peasants. Bekele Haile and Elias Abegaz also painted workers. Zerihun Mekonnen (see Figure 4.7) worked on health issues for the masses and Solomon Tesfaye on the revolutionary guard.



Figure 4.7 Zerihun Mekonnen, *Health*, 1977, charcoal on card-board, 25 x 20 in., courtesy of the School of Fine Art and Design, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa



Figure 4.8 Samuel Sahrew, *Workers*, 1978, Acrylic on canvas, 33 x 30 ½ in. courtesy of the School of Fine Art and Design, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa

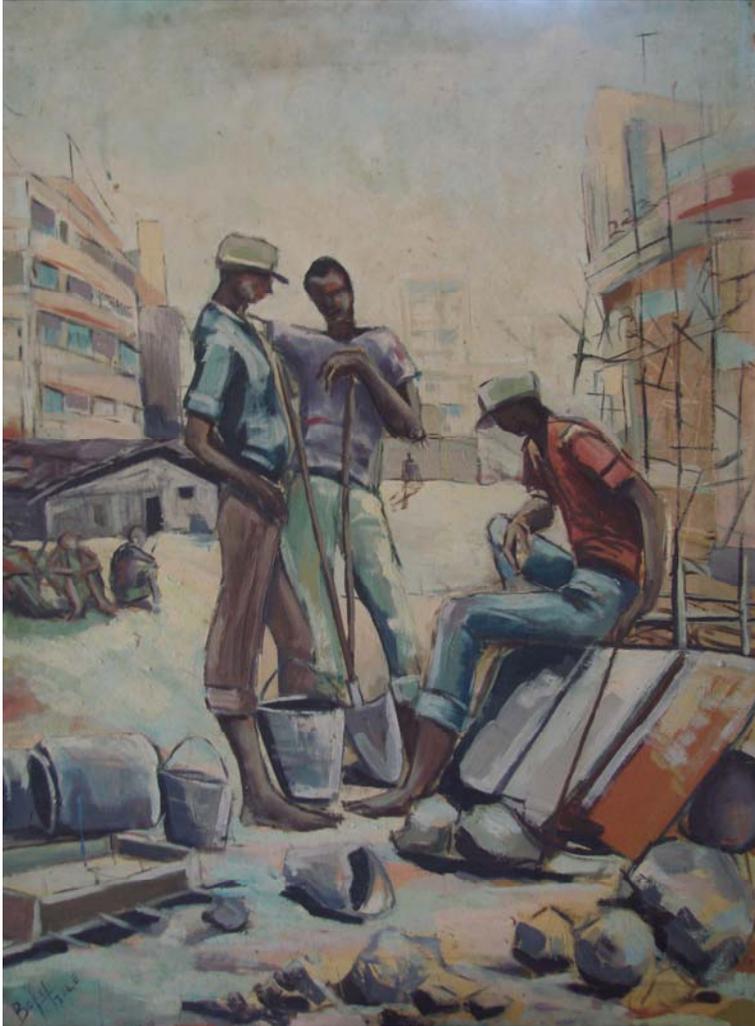


Figure 4.9 Samuel Sharew, *Workers*, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 40 in., courtesy of the School of Fine Art and Design, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa

There were also some woodcuts that depicted the revolution. Artists like Tadesse Hailemariam (see figure 4.10) made rare images on wood cuts such as the education of the masses with a portrait of Lenin at the back.



Figure 4.10 Tadesse Hailemariam, *Education for the Masses*, 1976, wood cut, 15 x 13 in., courtesy of the School of Fine Art and Design, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa

Director of the Fine Art School from 2000-2003 and student in the same school from 1979-93, sculptor Bekele Mekonnen (personal communication, May, 2009) said that he “chose to do sculptural works that focused on children’s games and other academic woodworks that had no bearing on the revolution or past history which many artists were involved in.” He said it was his way of denying the fact of his surrounding. At the height of the ‘Red Terror’ Mekonnen worked on wooden sculptures like *Kukulu* (hide and seek) and *Tezebet* (sarcasm). Except for older established artists like Tebebe Terfa, Worku Goshu, Teshome Bekele and Zerihun Yetemgeta, who exhibited their works in the major cultural institutions of the country like the Alliance Francaise and the Italian Cultural Institution, and who also managed to sell their works to foreigners, most artists like Bekele Mekonnen were not motivated to exhibit their works. According to Mekonnen, artists did not want to confine their works to only a few artistic idioms. Many of the artists were also young graduates of the Fine Art School who feared repercussions from the state if they indulged in other works. It is also important to note that many of the older artists like Skunder Boghossian, Wossene

Kosrof, Achamyeleh Debela and Tesfaye Tessema had already fled the country. Gebre Kristos Desta remained until 1978 and left the country at the height of the 'Red Terror,' disillusioned and broken.

The ones who remained, such as the ones mentioned above, refrained from revolutionary themes and instead represented landscapes, people, alphabets, etc. For instance, Teshome Bekele worked on the region of Harar, its people and its landscape, while Worku Goshu worked on religious themes. The State did not tamper with their works, nor did it impose its artistic ideals as it may have thought it worthy to leave their long artistic tenure untouched. Needless to say, the artists themselves abstained from challenging the status-quo of the State.

There were also older artists like Afework Tekle<sup>57</sup> and Abdurahman Sheriff who became active participants in what the State demanded of them. Abdurahman Sheriff's career was outlined in Chapter Three on the literary and visual modernists. For instance, Afework Tekle, who insists being referred to as 'His Honorable, Maitre Artiste World Laureate,' received the International Gold Mercury Award from Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam. Colonel Mengistu also went with dignitaries like President Erik Honeker of East Germany to visit Afework Tekle's exhibition. In the Forward of Afework Tekle's biography authored by Richard Pankhurst (1988, p.4) and published during the Derg's regime, the Minister and member of the Central Committee of the Workers Party, Girma Yilma is cited as having stated:

The real measure of genuinely creative people is the extent in which they play an important role while their country and people are struggling

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<sup>57</sup> Afework Tekle was born in 1932 and is said to be the pioneer of modern Ethiopian art. He studied at the Slade School in London and is very well known for his stained glass depictions. He had his first solo exhibition in 1954 which gave him the funds to travel around Europe for two years where he learned how to design and construct stained glass windows. He was commissioned for murals and mosaics in St. George's Cathedral, and several of his designs were used on the national stamps. He is probably well-known for his 1958 design of the stained glass windows in the Africa Hall of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa. The three windows cover an area of 150 square meters, and represent the sorrow of Africa's past, the struggle of the present, and hope for Africa's future.

for a bright future and a better life. Few artists in history have played a creative role in a great revolutionary upsurge, and with patriotism and determination have placed their talent at the service of their people and country. Such is Maitre Artist Afework Tekle who through his numerous outstanding works and untiring efforts---has clearly shown that he is a great supporter of the multi-faceted struggle for a better life, for the progress of Ethiopia and for the advancement of her culture.

According to art critic Esseye Gebre-Medhin, some artists like Abudrahman Sheriff were also “encouraged to conform by the system of rewards and privileges through commissions. Many, like respected artist Abdurahman Sheriff saw this sort of compensation as a fulfillment genuine enough, of their professional ideals.” (Gebre-Medhin as cited in Mekonnen, 2007, p.34) In 1986, the United Ethiopian Artists Association was reorganized to reflect the political realities of the country. Invited artists from all corners of the country met at Addis Ababa University where the participants nominated their choice. The Workers Party of Ethiopia nevertheless appointed party sympathizers as members with Abdurahman M Sheriff as the president. It is hence fair to say that, although not many, some artists fulfilled the ideal of the State with an ambiguous willingness. I say ambiguous willingness because Abdurahman Sheriff states today that he had “to accommodate the state’s wishes as I feared the consequences.” (Sheriff, personal communication, February, 2009) When describing artists like Afework Tekle, revolutionary cultural critic Aleme Eshete (1982, p.13) has stated:

The fate of the celebrated artist of the pre-revolutionary days at first was a difficult one. They were attacked for their past works and they had to defend themselves and to catch up with the progress of the revolution. Afework Tekle, who was most affected in this respect, never gave up or set aside his brush. Instead, with the rare discipline and diligence that characterizes this internationally famous artist, he set out to create works that depict the revolution and the Ethiopia he loves. The result was rewarding and Afework whose huge three meter by five meter work, *The Victory of Ethiopia through Work, Productivity and Struggle* now hangs

in the Patriot Center in Debre Zeit, has regained his former enviable position.

Statements like Aleme Eshete's were propaganda tools designed to arouse other artists to follow Afewerk Tekle's path. Artists were hence forced to create revolutionary works. Some like Tadesse Haile Mariam that I mentioned above, indulged in works of wood cut that depicted revolutionary figures like Lenin. Nevertheless, if we come to the majority of thematic works produced during this time that represented the revolution, in most of the cases these works that propagated socialism and the working class not only fulfilled governmental propaganda, but also subtly fueled the political will and imagination of resistance. They were the artists' way of signifying Ethiopian Marxism's ludicrous utopia. It is here that I want to bring Achille Mbembe's basic argument into discourse.

Mbembe has insisted that any analysis of African postcoloniality has to go beyond binaric strategies of resistance/ passivity, autonomy/ subjection, hegemony/ counter-hegemony and instead focus on the performance of authority and its subjects and authority's conscious and unconscious forms of control of its subjects to participate in the displays of power. His essay is a reified discourse of local idioms of power and its production of violence in postcolonial sites as it makes subjects out of citizens. It is also here that subjects interact with power and where one finds the coming together of politics and aesthetics. The body is the principal space of the discourse, a body which Mbembe (2001, p.121) said "first eats and drinks, the second a body that is open...in both ways; hence the significance given to orifices, and the central part they play in people's political humor." In this way, said Mbembe (ibid), "with great attention to detail, the apparatus of state finds ways of getting into its subjects most intimate spaces."

What Mbembe has called the ‘intimacy of tyranny’ is a mocking parody of executives in a strategy of political truth claiming. Using Cameroon as a subject of inquiry, Mbembe looks into multiple public spaces where the discourse of sexual terrorism plays central in the nature of African politics. Sex is a favorite form in Mbembe’s examples where the phallus is key and sexual categories such as an active penis manifest through sexual rights over subordinates and the number of concubines that one has. Sex therefore allegorizes the life of African political leaders and their excesses. While some have criticized the work of Mbembe as theoretically confused, his critics have also agreed that he initiates a new discourse outside of African reductivism and beyond essentialism where subjects are not only capable of self-understanding and self-representing, but also exercise a different kind of human agency and sovereignty through unconventional social imaginaries. They build a whole vocabulary parallel to the official state discourse. Mbembe therefore attempts to explore an alternative way of understanding Africanness by a simple and fundamental query of “what it means to be a subject in contexts of instability and crisis.” (Mbembe, 2001, p.121) He argues that the obscene and grotesque are indeed characteristics of African postcolonial regimes.

The notion postcolony identifies specifically a great historical trajectory that of societies recently emerging from the experiences of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves. To be sure, the postcolony is chaotically pluralistic; it has nonetheless an internal coherence. It is a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes. It is not however, just an economy of signs in which power is mirrored and imagined self-reflectively. The postcolony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion, as well as by distinctive ways identities are multiplied, transformed and put into circulation. (Mbembe, 2001, p.103)

This postcolonial relationship between authority and subject is ‘convivial,’ meaning a relationship brought about by having to live in the same space. He says (ibid) that this condition of ‘domesticity’ attests to the absence of vehement or violent resistance. He said that for resistance not to occur, the champions of power create innovative ideas of cultural inventories and concepts. “The champions of power,” Mbembe (2001, p.121) said, “invent a whole new set of constitution. or the commanding forces seek to institutionalize themselves ‘in the form of fetish,’ the fetish’ as another reality.”

The signs that power creates is imbued with superfluous meanings and if needed can resort to systematic afflictions of pain. The contradiction of ‘overt’ acts in public and ‘covert’ responses underground that the subject involves in results in the ‘zombification’ of both the dominant and those apparently dominated. This zombification means that each has robbed the other of vitality and left both impotent. (Mbembe, 2001, p.103)

The subject finds refuge from what Mbembe calls ‘commandment’ by playing with and manipulating images of power. For instance, in Togo when Togolese were called upon to shout party slogans, many would mock the supposed ‘glory’ of state power with a ‘simple tonal shift.’ Covertly, people sang about the sudden erection of the ‘enormous’ and ‘rigid’ ‘presidential phallus,’ of how it remained in this position and of its contacts with ‘vaginal fluids.’ (Mbembe, 2001, p.106). The postcolonial state, then, is embodied by the figure of the fat, promiscuous, imbecile and grotesque dictator and with parodies like this Mbembe has exemplified the performance of subjects on banalities of postcolonial power. The body is the principal locale of these mocking fantasies and festivities and celebrations are used for the staging of the display of power. Mbembe has insisted that the humor of orifices should be analyzed away from the concept of ‘crudity’ and ‘primitivity’ as they are typical manifestations of power.

He said that defecation, copulation, pomp and extravagance are classical ingredients in the production of power, and there is nothing specifically African about this. (Mbembe, 2001, p.106) From this perspective, Achille Mbembe has embraced the cultural dynamics of subject and object that I am most interested in, the articulation of a form of 'kitsch' that frames itself in a dialectical image between the violence on the body of the subject that is the lived experience, and the high ideals of modernism by those designated to simulate a stereotyped discourse of modernity in the aftermaths of colonialism.

Taking Mbembe's analysis of African subjectivity and its interaction with power, I want to look into Ethiopian images from 1974-1991 that were constitutive of the ideology of the State in a parody that was also nostalgic for glory. Artworks were ambiguous and acted in neutral spaces of mimicry, without the satirical impulse or without the laughter of parody. They evoked parody, storytelling, and exegesis in ascribing meaning that was more appropriate for nostalgia rather than any kind of serious spectatorship. In the midst of Ethiopian socialism's shock and disturbance, artists simultaneously parodied the propagandist utopian ideal of the socialist State while at the same time longing for utopia itself. Taking analysis of visuality outside hegemonic Eurocentric themes, my interrogation of these images is similar to Mbembe's. It is one that is informed by a local social and psychological phenomenon that understands history and the broad and mutable relationships between local aspects of culture. While parodies can be both critical and sympathetic, these images, however, narrated the history of the marginalized through images of kings and queens, through images of the socialist state of workers and peasants, through portraits of past valor, and through visions of grandeur and might. These identities not only belonged to those who had died from famine and genocide, but they were also the identities of those who were living with the possibility of danger.

The images of *His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, elect of God, conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah* with lineage close to Solomon and David via Queen of Sheba, and who was deposed by the socialist State for having supposedly been a tyrant and a dictator, was strategically absent from any artistic production. On the artists' part, the primary reason for this absence was the obvious fear of repercussion from power. Artists nevertheless articulated a longing for monarchy through depictions of Queen Taitou and Emperor Tewodros, evoking a simultaneous parody of divine right monarchy and the vagaries and manipulation of power, while criticizing the present State and as if saying it was no different from prior divine rulers. The construction of the concept of 'kitsch' from Mbembe's argument that I am attempting to decipher is not to form an argument for materiality of an art form that is as tactile as painting or sculpture, but to frame the conceptual interpretation of a social reality that informs an alternative viewpoint to analyze the social context of a particular work of art.

As said earlier, many artists mistrusted the teleological framework of the Derg's version of Ethiopian history, the determinations of its ideology, and the politically immaterial mandates that it imposed. Many, like said above, parodied power by simultaneously contesting and acknowledging its encumbrance. For instance, artist Bekele Mekonnen went to the U.S.S.R from 1980-1988 to escape the National Service that was required from the youth for two years. The government sent its youth to places like the Ogaden, Eritrea or Tigray where it was waging war against insurgents. He said he had "no interest to go to a socialist country for further education and postponed several scholarships for four years." (Mekonnen, personal communication, May, 2009) He went to the U.S.S.R to study art at the Moscow State Institute of Fine Arts. He left because he thought he was going to be killed if he remained in the country. Mekonnen (ibid) said of his time in the U.S.S.R.: "I spent most of my time at the Bolshoi Theater

or the Library of Foreign Literature. There was a lot of underground movement in the USSR at that time. People who were against Soviet Communism gathered in different places to discuss alternatives. My professor, Professor Macahlsky was one of these people. I spent a lot of time with him and the underground movement.” The embattled artist therefore precariously employed the limits and the possibilities of the language of art, his own parodic relation to the art of the present including his own country’s interpretation of the art of the present.

Bekele Mekonnen’s stay in the U.S.S.R. ignored power’s intent to educate him in the best spirit of socialism, and power was thus rendered as powerless despite its material power. Artists in the home front also defied power by repeatedly doing the same themes such as workers and peasants like a dubious and fraudulent activity with extreme skepticism to the ideology and antagonism to power. Moreover, artists recognized that they were being surveilled like Foucault’s panopticon. Many artists like Bisrat Shebabaw and Geta Mekonnen say today that “they just did what was expected of them.” (Mekonnen, personal communication, May 2009) These works that they produced during the revolution are not even part of their collection and many do not know their whereabouts as if it was a period they completely want to forget.

Bekele Mekonnen (personal communication, May 2009) said that “the artworks were also reflective of the larger populace where Ethiopians were subjected to political schools that taught them the ideology of Marxism-Leninism but was in reality a propaganda school for the state’s tailored ideology of socialism.” It was mandatory for everyone to attend these political schools, Foucault’s relationship between systems of social control and people in a disciplinary situation. People remember these schools today with disdain and aversion as the schools’ propaganda endorsed the cruelty and mayhem that became part of their objective reality. “In the name of socialism,” said Bekele Mekonnen (ibid), “many of the youth were being slaughtered as reactionaries

and ant-revolutionaries. The artist was subjected to that routine reality.” Although one could see in these images the domesticated ‘convival’ and tension between subject and ruler, resistance and hegemony where subjectivity and agency were adulterated, one could also see a re-inscribed narrative of subversive mimicking that gave a political reading to the works. The images were visual narratives of protest of lived experiences. Artists did not give much attention to the handling of materials, the extension into and incorporation of real space, the dynamism of the forms, or to the process itself.

From this perspective, these images became sites of performances where the artist responded to a performance by another performance of illusionary representation. The artist as the cynical humanist developed the technique of serial dedication and produced similar works like peasants, workers and farmers with minimal modification. It seemed that through these images, the artist also became the spectator, switching from production to reception, artist and spectator becoming interchangeable. In this way, while Ethiopian ‘kitsch’ may have not been novel in its assumption, it was nevertheless avant-garde in its outcome. As Calinescu (1987, p.232) said:

The possibility of the avant-garde using kitsch elements and conversely, of kitsch’s making use of avant-garde devices is just an indication of how complex a concept kitsch is. We are dealing here indeed with one of the most bewildering and elusive categories of modern aesthetics. Like art itself which is both an imitation and a negation, kitsch cannot be defined from a single vantage point. And again like art—or for that matter anti-art—kitsch refuses to lend itself even to a negative definition, because it simply has no single compelling, distinct counter-concept.

It is precisely this parody that paradoxically brought about a direct confrontation to power that I argue was ‘kitsch’ and had an avant-garde nature. What was interesting in this entire exercise was not the search for redemption, as that seemed very far-fetched, but the allegorical readings of material history that constituted a dialectical

image that was circumscribed within images of tension. These images were of far-reaching consequences and were in the realm of routine and mundane experiences. I have attempted to engage with the contentious term of 'kitsch' as an important performative text in Ethiopia's artistic production from 1974-1991.

The most unfortunate part of this period was that artistic production that should have been closely connected to experimentation, innovation and originality was literally halted for seventeen years. This legacy still lingers today where contemporary art struggles between the incomplete socialist realist milieu of its mentors who continue to teach in the Art School and an identity that is trying to come out from that shackle. Moreover, many of the artists who graduated from the Fine Art School during this period fled the country and many of the ones who remained in the country continued to survive in other fields. Artists who continued in the art world as painters and sculptors continue to be affected in the lingering effect of the period. While artists enjoy the newly found freedom of expression in the absence of scholarship and criticism, their works continue to be problematic. This will be explored in Chapter Five on contemporary artists. "With the downfall of the Derg," said Geta Mekonnen (2007, p.35), "artists were finally free from explicit influence and control. Free to explore their individual tendencies and directions." Geta Mekonnen then mulled over art critic Esseye Gebre Medhin's reflections about which he said "the mindset as to what to do and how to define what is done still lingers." (ibid) Geta Mekonnen (ibid) continued: "Over the last thirty years since the 1974 revolution, artists have often wandered through different approaches in an attempt to find meaning for their artistic skill and creativity. Hoping to piece together the puzzle of their identity, most young artists are preoccupied with the question of 'Ethiopianness' in their work."

Ethiopian artists' production from 1974-1991 was therefore the articulation of the subject's experience of trauma and loss. As Mbembe (2001, p.106) has said,

individuals kidnap power “and force it as if by accident to examine its own vulgarity.” One could analyze in an Mbembean fashion that the Ethiopian artist/subject manipulated power, reproducing its epistemology and at the same time revealing its banality through simulacra and pretense, consequently undermining authority. From the circulation of meanings that the African subject in Mbembe and the Parisienne subject in Benjamin depict in the process of exercising his/her existence, I contend that what is relevant is not the vulgarity of the mode of expression in the African or the fetishization of commodities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisienne, but the intensity and innovation that gathers around and within his/her social existence. I also argue that what is ‘kitsch’ and what is fine art is also not too relevant outside of Western art historical certitude.

### ***Monument Art of the Period***

Except for the works of Bekele Mekonnen, I have exclusively discussed works that were in the area of painting. One would think that sculptural works and monuments are important tools in making and disseminating propaganda to implant the ideals of the revolution in the minds of citizens. Nevertheless, there were only few monuments that came up during the Derg, and except for two that still exist, most of them were removed when the EPRDF took power in 1991. The ones removed were largely portraits of Vladimir Lenin. It was probably because there were not too many sculptors in the country that monuments did not contribute much to the required value of the revolution. The few sculptors who were in the country during that time were Tadesse Mamecha, Tadesse Belayneh, Tadesse Gizaw, Bekele Abebe, Bekele Mekonnen and Alemayehu Bizuneh. It is Tadesse Mamecha’s works that still stand today. His concrete sculpture that is called ‘Nikate an Afar’ (consciousness; presumably revolutionary consciousness of the ethnic group Afar) is a replica of his 1971 graduate work at the St. Petersburg Art Academy, USSR, and still stands today by the National Theater in Addis

Ababa. It was initiated by the poet and playwright Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, who was at the time Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Culture and Sports Affairs. The second sculpture still stands in the middle of town and depicts the proletarian.

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## Chapter 5

### **Contemporary Ethiopian Art: The Dimension Group, the Ras Mekonnen Group, and the Works of Bisrat Shebabw, Bekele Mekonnen, Behailu Bezabih, Salem Mekuria and Michael Tsegaye**

*After the fall of the Derg, and the demise of state dictated and censored art, the direction of the visual arts made a u-turn back to Christian Ethiopian art and the tradition of the magic scrolls, grasping for inspiration. The fusion of academic style with secular Christian art and with the unique tradition of the magic scrolls was taken as the only alternative in some instances, the only way forward for Ethiopian art. (Mekonnen, 2001, p.3)*

Geta Mekonnen said this on the seventh anniversary of the Dimension group, a group of eight Ethiopian artists organized in 1995, four years after the fall of the Derg regime. The group, which came together with five painters and three sculptors of the same generation, believed at the time that Ethiopian artists were at a crossroad. “The three separate epochs in Ethiopia over the last three decades,” said the introductory catalogue of the group, “in their unique ways, have affected the life of the artists, creating a situation for reflection and contemplation.” (Mekonnen, 2001, p.3)

Geta Mekonnen who was the founder of the group said that “modern Ethiopian art after the fall of the Derg was trying to find itself after seventeen years of dictated aesthetics, and thus the necessity to have brought a group like this together.” (Mekonnen, 2001, p.3) In its tenure of seven years, this group had seven annual exhibitions with one guest artist each year to exhibit with the group. In 2001, when the Dimension Group had its last exhibition, the Fine Art School also became the School of Fine Arts and Design and was incorporated into Addis Ababa University. Did artists produce works in response to the end of official art and the collapse of the political authoritarian system? Did artists mourn, remember and critically engage with

overcoming the past, examining issues around the memory of the past? Moreover, how has this trajectory of the Derg's regime affected contemporary Ethiopian art? What constitutes contemporary Ethiopian art today and with which issues do artists in Ethiopia locate their practices? These are questions that are critical in reflecting not only on the legacy of the Derg regime, but also on the intellectual environment of contemporary Ethiopian art at the present.

While the questions posed above can only be interrogated within the trajectory of Ethiopia's modernity and modernism's complex historical web, contemporary art in Ethiopia has instead flourished without addressing not only its historical past but also without critically engaging the social facts of modernity. It has thrived without attending to the shifting dynamics of identities that have become complex and multiple and that grow out of a history of changing responses to economic, political and cultural forces. The regime of the military junta forced Ethiopian artists and intellectuals to make difficult political choices, and many emigrated to Europe and the United States. The artists who remained in the country and who witnessed the fall of the regime struggled to rebel against the established codes of composition and the idealized realism of heroic and mythical subjects, in an attempt to freely express their unconventional vision without the stifling dictates of official taste. Many revolted against the previous regime's representational art and academic perfection, but as Geta Mekonnen said above, many also could not come out from the traditional Coptic repertoire for inspiration. Art after the fall of the Derg regime was hence caught between a desire to subvert and challenge the institutional structures of the prior State and the fundamental absences of critical insight that would have helped in formulating new concepts of discourse. This discourse was necessary to encapsulate the complexities of post-socialist Ethiopian life and would in turn have initiated new discussion outside reductivism and beyond essentialism.

The legacies of the Derg regime in artistic production have remained an open question without the necessary criticism and reevaluation. Contemporary Ethiopian art grew out of this dynamic without the conscious acknowledgment of reclaiming and defining the past in the lived reality of a deeply ambiguous present. Although collaborative efforts by groups of artists such as the Dimension Group attempted to engage in the development of new aesthetics that was detached from previous official aesthetic norms, divergent experiences of the artists involved, and, more importantly, the lack of critical discourse surrounding artistic production prevented the construction of a new consciousness. Moreover, after the fall of the Derg, European modernity and modernism's vision of the moral life that was prevalent in the Haile Selassie years continued to filter itself into the pedagogy of post-socialist Ethiopian cultural institutions and value judgments. Ethiopian imaginative expression exists even today within this context of problematical epistemic contradictions.

One of the thorniest concepts of contemporary art in Ethiopia is hence the absence of critical discourse, thus the conflicting relations of contemporary art to its own temporality. Whereas there has been an increase of artists in the last decade, this has made little impact on the institutional structures of critical discourse. Exhibitions are abundant with young artists producing a multitude of work. Newspapers weekly publicize these efforts with scant knowledge of what it is that is being produced. Young journalists are eager to learn, but there is no platform to accommodate them. There are no forums, seminars or public lectures where artists or art students could get acquainted with the dynamics and paradigms of other contemporary cultures or the engulfed debates of African modernism.

In this chapter, I attempt to assess the milieu of contemporary art by looking into the collaborative efforts of groups of artists like the Dimension Group and a young group of artists who lived in an area called Ras Mekonnen Bridge and who I will call

the Ras Mekonnen Group since they did not have a designated name. However fragmentary, there are also few artists who continue to work today and who have attempted to articulate a broader discursive field of the post-Derg period's haziness and uncertainty. From this perspective, I will examine the works of artists Bekele Mekonnen, Behailu Bezabih and Bisrat Shebabaw, as artists who not only were products of the historical conjuncture of Ethiopian socialism, but also as artists who have engaged in complex aesthetic, political, and philosophical questions about Ethiopian modernity and modernism. These artists are engaged in working with traditional mediums of painting and sculpting. New media works are few and rare in artists' works mainly because artists are still confined by the traditional formal training of the Fine Art School.

Artistic experimentation with the moving image of film, video and digital installations that play such a crucial role in contemporary art practice is still a new genre that has yet not taken root. Moreover, the resources to create new work in experimental materials are extremely meager which has contributed to the lack of motivation by artists to indulge in this genus of work. Although the predicament of new media work is such, I will nevertheless look into the works of Salem Mekuria, a diaspora artist who has produced two major works in film and video installation and who I believe has left an impact in the Ethiopian artistic scene. Challenging works in photography are also uncommon primarily because the use of the medium as artistic inquiry was abruptly ceased during the revolution. Experimental works in photography is a recent phenomenon and photographers like Michael Tsegaye are making a mark in the field of experimental photography. The creation of a new idiom in modern art photography has a long way to go but artists like Tsegaye are uncovering a rich vein of experimental work. I will look into the photographic works of Michael Tsegaye who I believe understands the principles and significance of images.

When looking at Bisrat Shebabaw's works, I will particularly investigate the construction of gender in Ethiopian modernism. Being one of the few women artists in the country, Shebabaw is emblematic of her work and comments not only on Ethiopian contemporary art, but also on the limits of a female artist in Ethiopian modern art's discursive strategy. Although few in number, I believe that these artists are exploring alternative ways to understand Ethiopianity despite the social and epistemological vacuum that surrounds Ethiopian contemporary art. In a much broader set of discussions, I trust that these artists would give a good glimpse to comprehending the landscape of Ethiopian contemporary art and its challenges. Although not visible now, I believe that it is within Mekonnen, Shebabaw, Bezabih, Tsegaye and Mekuria's strong bodies of works that the potential for criticality will emerge, provided that critical institutions also transpire to appraise and support artistic developments in the country.

### ***The Dimension and Ras Mekonnen Group***

The Dimension Group was established in 1995 with Behailu Bezabih, Bekele Mekonnen, Eshetu Tiruneh, Geta Mekonnen, Kidane Belay, Mezgebu Tessema, Muzie Awel and Tadesse Mesfin. The group was comprised of five painters and three sculptors. Except for Geta Mekonnen who received his MFA from the Slade School of London and Behailu Bezabih who remained in the country after his BFA, all were sent for their MFAs by the Derg regime to Soviet-sponsored schools in Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev after finishing their undergraduate studies at the School of Fine Art and Design. "As varied as our educational background and artistic interests were," said Geta Mekonnen (personal communication, May 2009), "it was important for us to come together to begin some kind of innovation in art that had been severely damaged during seventeen years of socialist rule." The word 'dimension' was translated from the

Amharic word ‘awtar’ which means a tightened string of harp, a guy rope of a tent, or a ray of the sun.

Each string of the harp, creates its own sound but together with other strings it creates melody. One guy rope does not hold the tent straight but together with others it can support a shelter. Thus, the idea is for each artist to bring their individual light so that together a brighter light is created. The Dimension group does not attempt to solicit any singular response to the variety of issues that feature in contemporary Ethiopian art. As the derivation of its name would suggest, there is not just a single direction to be followed. There are a multitude of them...a great many possibilities for the established, as well as the up and coming artist. (Mekonnen, 1995, p.2)

Although the purely realistic work of Mezgebu Tessema and the semi-realist works of Eshetu Tiruneh widely diverged both formally and conceptually from the contemplative works of Geta Mekonnen, Behailu Bezabih and Bekele Mekonnen, the group managed to effectively function for seven years. Its seven years tenure was highly vibrant not only with its annual exhibition, but also with its regular dialogues and poetry recitals. While many of the artists who graduated from the Soviet Union, like Muzie Awel and Mezgebu Tessema, indulged in academic works, non-academic and experimental approaches generated exciting and imaginative works in Geta Mekonnen, Behailu Bezabih and Bekele Mekonnen. For instance, if one examines the group’s 2001 exhibition, Behailu Bezabih’s *Units I*<sup>58</sup>(see Figure 5.1) indulged in the vibrant, anarchic energy of childhood while Geta Mekonnen’s photographic works of *Mestawot* (mirror) (see Figure 5.2) addressed the havoc caused to city shops by a public disturbance in Addis Ababa in 2001.

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<sup>58</sup> See Appendix for description.



Figure 5.1 Behailu Bezabih, *Unit I 2001*, 2001, mixed media on canvas, 48 x 48 in., courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5.2 Geta Mekonnen, *Mestawot*, 2001, gelatin print, courtesy of the artist.

Mekonnen's photographic works signaled optically accurate renderings of a bleak present, a reminder and fresh elegy to a past that seemed to threaten to come back. A set of provocative images captured bruised spirits of past and present, exploring memories of the elusive and fragile nature of violence that one thought had vanished and yet reminded one that it could again surface. The resonances of past

violence could not run any deeper than they did in these remarkable photographs.

Alemshet Kebede of the Ethiopian Herald commented on the exhibition of the group:

The mounted exhibition is composed of different works. Every artist has presented his own work with his/her style and artistic trend that differs from others. For instance, artist Geta Mekonnen seems to be very impressed by last year's Addis Ababa's hot reaction against businessmen in the main part of the city especially around the Piazza and Merkato areas. In his work entitled *Mestawot* a conceptual art-photograph he has mounted twelve frames with broken mirrors. These broken window glasses (one is of course unbroken) may be depicting that the previous clam situation is an easy reminder of the metropolitan's hooligans' act of last year. Behind the broken windows are displayed photographs of the city. (Kebede, 2001)

In this same exhibition, Bekele Mekonnen's sculpture *Our Time 2001* (see Figure 5. 3) was made from indigenous materials such as 'akmbalo' (the cover used to make Ethiopian bread which is called injera), pestles and mortars.



Figure 5.3 Bekele Mekonnen, *Our Time 2001*, 2001, mixed media work, courtesy of the artist

In this work, Bekele Mekonnen talked about the degradation and suffering of his people. "The end of the Derg regime and the coming of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)," said a review of this exhibition, "did not

restore any faith in Bekele. He saw the never-ending human tragedy and continuation of suffering and degradation of Ethiopia's people." (Zelege, 2005)

Bekele Mekonnen's use of local materials to address controversial issues around the memory of past political upheavals as well as live political questions of the present gave this image an agonizing and poignant moral fiber. Dawit Birhanu of *Time Out* newspaper commented on Bekele Mekonnen's use of indigenous materials:

Bekele Mekonnen's soul searching brought him in touch with the artist within. Bekele's use of familiar and traditional objects including mortars, pestles and pieces of wood has earned him recognition. His medium changes depending on the message he wants to convey although he mostly uses wood and metals and creates silhouettes by adding color and texture, the object of his art is to trigger mental explosion, to create dialogue and actively seek explanation about socio-cultural political and economic phenomenon which make it different from the more frequent ultimate objective to reach solution. (Birhanu, 2000)

Although Bekele Mekonnen received his MFA in sculpture from Moscow State Fine Art Institute, his works appealed with a certain charm to the non-uniformity of the Russian art scene itself in the communist era, with its diversity as well as its interest in fields and genre. Bekele Mekonnen has said that in his entire seven-year stay in the Soviet Union, he participated in the underground Russian avant-garde art scene that attempted to deconstruct the imposed official nature of art which called for temporal and epochal closure.

Bekele Mekonnen's sculptures in the Dimension Group's exhibitions were unlike any. Not only did he use local materials, his sculptures also defied basic conventional disciplinary assumptions of the medium. In her article, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, Rosalind Krauss argued early in 1979 the non-universality of sculpture and complicated the basic conventional disciplinary assumptions of the medium. She said:

This suspicion of a career that moves continually and erratically beyond the domain of sculpture obviously derives from the modernist demand for the purity and separateness of the various mediums (and thus the necessary specialization of a practitioner within a given medium.) But what appears as eclectic from one point of view can be seen as rigorously logical from another. For within the situation of postmodernism, practice is not defined in relation to a given medium—p sculpture—but rather in relation to the logical operation on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium—photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors or sculpture itself—might be used. (Krauss, 1987, p.43)

Although Krauss' challenge to the conventionality of sculpture arose from conceptions of postmodernism, I brought up her argument here to bring to light Bekele Mekonnen's avant-garde approach to producing works that were unstable in contested sets of relations rather than fixed sites. The works of Bekele Mekonnen, Behailu Bezabih and Geta Mekonnen stood in stark contrast to other members of the group in their paradoxical mixture of rebellion and openness, and in my opinion contributed to the demise of the group. The group could no longer accommodate its name 'awtar' as Bekele Mekonnen, Behailu Bezabih and Geta Mekonnen became increasingly experimental in their creative punches, commenting upon the processes of mediation and the critique of power in works that were in collusion with the safe and sedate creativity of the rest of the group. It is no wonder then that today Eshetu Tiruneh says (personal communication, May 2009): "A few of the artists had their own agenda, they hijacked the initial intent of the group of bringing different mindset of artists together and contributed to the downfall of the group."

Geta Mekonnen believes that the coming of Yohannes Gedamu from Germany also contributed to the free impulse and inventiveness of his works as well as of the works of Behailu Bezabih and Bekele Mekonnen. Yohannes Gedamu was a student of Gebre Kristos Desta and from 1980 until his return to Ethiopia in 1997 where he lived and worked as a full time artist in Cologne, Germany. According to Rebecca Nagy

(2007), “his paintings, are distinguished by abstract images that often suggest landscapes but with few recognizable forms, or none at all. His fluid color and emotive use of color recall the expressionistic style of his teacher and friend Gebre Kristos Desta and of German and other European Expressionists whose work both artists knew from their years living in Cologne and traveling on the continent.” Needless to say, the Dimension Group had its last exhibition in October 2001 at the Alliance Ethio Francaise, and the group disintegrated after this exhibition.

I will discuss further the works of Bekele Mekonnen and Behailu Bezabih who continue to create provocative works. Geta Mekonnen (personal communication, May 2009) has said he has “temporarily suspended his artistic career.” Today, he owns a thriving design industry but nevertheless continues to write on the art scene in Ethiopia. Muzie Awel is the current Director of the School of Fine Arts and Design and has not exhibited work since 2001. Eshetu Tiruneh has established his own art school, Kidane Belay died in 2000, and Mezgebu Tessema and Tadesse Mesfin are teachers at the School of Fine Art and Design. What was the group’s legacy? Although Eshetu Tiruneh thinks that the group failed to leave any bequest to young generation artists and to the artistic ambience of the time, Bekele Mekonnen and Geta Mekonnen argue that at the minimum, the group managed to complicate and disturb the forms of modern art that had transpired since the fall of the Derg in 1991, which mainly embellished itself in the forms of the Orthodox Coptic repertoire. They argue that the frequent dialogues conducted by the group surrounding modern Ethiopian art, as well as works produced that were highly imaginative and experimental such as the ones mentioned above, left an impact that should never be underestimated and that pioneered a new way of thinking in the perception of modern art.

While this may be the case, I argue that the very lack of a proper academic discipline of art history and criticism has prevented the continuity and growth of

epistemology that Geta Mekonnen and Bekele Mekonnen claim to have arisen out from the legacy of the Dimension Group. From this perspective, the legacy of the Dimension group today is not visible except for the few artists that I will attempt to investigate below. Not formally organized like the Dimension Group, a group of young artists who lived in the same house around the Ras Mekonnen Bridge became visible through a group exhibition conducted in their house in 2003. They were Tesfahun Kibru, Tamerat Gezahegn, Dawit Geressu and Mulugeta Kassa. They were all graduates of the School of Fine Arts and Design, a school which is mainly inundated with formal concerns producing students with excellent techniques, but devoid of any theoretical concerns. What made this group interesting was their utilization of various mediums varying from hide and metal to salvaged material, garbage and refuse. What also made them interesting was the interplay of word, image and space that created a visual imagery of identity and memory. They chronicled the struggles surrounding the harsh facts of poverty and its dispossession, often through works embedded with the enigma of the Ethiopian vernacular.

This particularly stood out in the works of Tamerat Gezahegn. His work resembled that of the *debertera* scrolls and resonated the vibrancy of Ethiopia's age-old healing arts. Unlike the *debertera* scrolls that are made of parchments, Gezahegn used life-sized cardboards with drawings of complex iconography such as words of healing, and drawings of animals that resembled painful events and dangerous encounters. The infinity of meanings portrayed on his works were juxtaposed in surrealist oddity where multiple questions about healing and meaning emerged. One also read pain and its provocations, simultaneously reading the mobilization of power into the possibility of healing. It seemed that Gezahegn was penetrating the unknown in search of partial answers. The secret charm of the work's threatening images attempted to create its own model for and role in salvation. "Identity only becomes a subject when it is in crisis,"

said Kobena Mercer (1994), “when something that is thought to be fixed, coherent and stable, is suddenly moved by the experience of doubt and of uncertainty.”

Positioned within poverty’s discursive frame, one can readily interpret Tamerat Gezahegn’s work as a reference to destitution, hardship and distress that is a common subtext to a majority of the Ethiopian populace. Poverty evokes a sense of doubt and uncertainty that erodes a predictable framework of an identity. Gezahegn depicted the Ethiopian imagining of self that continuously repositions itself in complex queries that are caught in the terrain of poverty. On the other hand, Tesfahun Kibru used earthy colored hides that were exceptionally molded to carve a design or image. The intricate detailing and texture in some of Kibru’s leather works depicted a three dimensional chimera with an illusion of movement. Conceptually and formally, Kibru’s works exemplified the possibilities that exist when using leather as an art medium. Mulugeta Kassa and Dawit Geressu produced works of paintings and installation. While the very idea of installation permits contacts and interplay in so far as it allows flexibility, great conceptions of art can never be divorced from the intellectual environment that spawns them. The intellectual environment that situated discussion of modern and contemporary African cultural production within the larger discourse of modernity and modernism was critically deficient. The connections between the discourse and the truncated views of these artists of the debates, contradictions and challenges inherent in the field hence rendered the problematic in these works of installations that were a *mélange* of skewed and obscure themes.

Nevertheless, I argue that, if only temporarily, these artists along with Tesfaun Kibru and Tamerat Gezahegn created a contemporary art scene and new networks of reception for art in Ethiopia. Furthermore, these young artists periodically gathered to discuss the creative process, influences, exhibitions, and the location of their work in relation to other Ethiopian artists, but absent was discussion of trends within the field of

contemporary African art. For instance, these young artists had no knowledge of Short Century, Documenta, and Africa in Venice, let alone of the curators of these shows. The shifting identity of the African artist and how new genres of African art had appeared onto a world stage was hence a distant discourse. It is important to note that this group that grew spontaneously was initially influenced by diaspora artists like Mikael Bete Selassie<sup>59</sup> and Lulu Cherinet<sup>60</sup> who came to the country periodically to exhibit their works, but soon as these visits became infrequent, these young artists' works also started to degenerate. The group itself disintegrated in 2006. The once promising hide and leather works of Tesfahun Kibru is today replaced by tawdry metal work. Although Kibru is currently attempting to transfer mundane objects of everyday use into works of art, his latest works have instead taken on an odd aestheticism with some of the defining characteristics of metal handicrafts with bottomless assembly of random metal items. Tamerat Gezahegn still works on themes of healing art that have become repetitive and without the poignancy of his earlier works. Dawit Geressu has stopped exhibiting his works, and Mulugeta Kassa has switched to expressionistic types of landscape art.

Although for the first time after the Derg, the Dimension Group initiated a discourse that explored an alternative way of understanding Ethiopian modernism beyond familiar discourses, both groups of artists were, as discussed above, regrettably isolated from the complex aesthetic, political, and philosophical questions that dominated discussions of African modernity and modernism. Unfortunately, neither the School of Fine Art and Design nor the only higher academic institute of Addis Ababa

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<sup>59</sup> Artist Mikael Bete-Selassie lives and works in Paris. He is best known for his papier machete sculptures. Bete Selassie worked closely with artists Tesfaun Kibru and Tamerat Gezahegn with sculptural works. Tesfahun is particularly influenced by Mikael's works.

<sup>60</sup> Loulou Cherinet is of Swedish and Ethiopian parents who lives and works in Sweden. She has participated in shows like Africa Remix, Venice Biennale and Sao Paolo Biennale. She is a video artist who uses conceptual metaphors of the Ethiopian vernacular

University by which the school is administered, can detail the discursive boundary of current debates and practices. These artists, who are products of these institutes, therefore could not take the task of clarifying the complex and contradictory relationship of Ethiopian modernity and modernism. Although I argue that both groups of artists played an important role in ushering a new panorama to the contemporary art scene, the lack of infrastructure to critically examine their works which would have in turn nurtured and cultivated their own crucial engagement with their works, contributed to the midstream conclusion of their imaginative expression.

On the other hand, the works of Bisrat Shebabaw, Behailu Bezabih and Bekele Mekonnen have broached Ethiopian modernism's crisis and schisms. I believe that their works continue to incorporate their lived lives while negotiating the exigencies of time and place, by simultaneously remapping their experiences to find themselves within Ethiopia's present.

### ***Bisrat Shebabaw***

Women artists have been few in Ethiopia and the understanding and legitimizing of women's art has been a continuous narrative of a hegemonic gaze. The beginning of Ethiopian women's modernism can be traced back to 1941 during which time the Emperor launched modernizing projects and insisted on using European modernist thoughts as a form of determinism to be followed. Hence, the participation of women in Ethiopian modernism was part of the project of modernity in the national space of Haile Selassie. Women's participation in all aspects of modernism helped as a discursive strategy in the production and reproduction of the Emperor's image as a modernizing subject. Critical thought and discourse in women's participation was nevertheless abstracted from the social contexts of the historical experiences of women's social collective.

The Emperor's openness towards women's participation in modernism was particularly rhetorical as critical thinking was blurred and devalued within the framework of a patriarchal modernist narrative. For instance, the institutional actualization of a critical component of women in cultural production was absent in the founding curriculum of the Fine Art School when it was established in 1957, and when, as part of the Emperor's great modernist venture, women were encouraged to join in the school's academic endeavor. Without a specific institutional structure that the meaning of women's experience could transfer into art, the promotion of women artists was only exclusively advantageous and critical to image building for the Emperor in regenerating both a sense of social and political agency.

In discussing the urgency and prevalence of the politics of identification, Rey Chow (2003, p.325) has asked: "Is there a way of finding the native without simply ignoring the image, or substituting a 'correct' image of the ethnic specimen for an 'incorrect' one, or giving the native a 'true' voice behind her 'false' image?" Chow contests the study of the image of 'woman' in marginal contexts as being analyzed in group culture and is stressing the necessity of readings beyond the canon of marginality and into the specific sites of particular collectives. Indeed, women's modernism in the discursive space of Haile Selassie was found with no objective foundation, but was something that nicely fit the embrace of an uncritical Western modernist rhetoric of women's emancipation, and therefore the promotion of the Emperor's own social political agenda.

The works of the first wave women artists like Ketesela Atnafu<sup>61</sup> hence came within this ambiguous modernist discourse as well as within the dilemmas of a

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<sup>61</sup> Ketsela Atnafu is the first woman graduate of the Fine Art School. Early on, she had exhibited her works in Addis Ababa quite extensively. She later stopped painting and got involved in craft works. She is now an active advocate of Ethiopian craft workers and represents them in international exhibitions and fairs.

conflicting female imaginary that is embedded in the construction of Ethiopian women in the larger narrative of the country. What is also worthy of note here is that despite their distinctly divergent experiences from male artists, the formation of the discursive image of women's art had its roots in thinking about visuality from a male perspective. They produced works that were socially acceptable in the rigid patriarchal structures of Ethiopian modernism that also functioned as a constant barrier to self definition. Male ideology and female identity denied the validity of women's individual experiences and female subjectivities where women's work was relegated to being warm and feminine, but also insignificant. Their work was a representation of masculine desire, the lines of male Orthodox inheritance that served an unconscious need to be accepted in the society as its ontological quest was the resources of the privileged traditional Orthodox Church.

The convention of the Church was extremely powerful and the male gaze so omnipresent that women's works during this period of Ethiopian modernity actively participated in positioning the Ethiopian woman as an objectified female figure. Besides presenting works of the recurring image of the Virgin Goddess with the Virgin birth that many male artists also produced in the earlier years of Ethiopian modernity, images of women appeared in women's art that maintained Mary's perpetual flame and their own chastity; Ketsela Atnafu's earlier works portrays this exemplar. Images envisioning the divine appeared in multiple ways, in reverence and in humility, often depicting the Church's stories and mythologies surrounding women around these themes. The appropriation of the woman's body as a national symbol also dominated women artists' modern discourse. The works of these first wave artists was hence historically coded as masculine and as representations of masculine desire and the lines of male inheritance. With a narrow definition of modernism, women's identity was reinforced by ethnography of pictorial mythical narratives.

Even the women artists that were called progressive or avant- garde, like Desta Hagos<sup>62</sup> who graduated from the Fine Art School in the 1960s, were represented in terms of their relationship to canonical male artists like Gebre Kristos Desta. The modernizing drive that set out to rhetorically enlighten and liberate Ethiopian women modernists in the heydays of Haile Selassie's modernism ended up 'Othering' these women toward their exclusion. None of these artists, except for Desta Hagos, are artistically active today and Hagos' works still remain under the shadow of Gebre Kristos Desta. To understand the predicaments of these artists, one has to therefore understand the politics of visibility and the hegemony of vision as Ethiopian modernity is mainly organized around a masculine norm.

It would be fair to say that despite Ethiopia's diverse non-Christian culture, the tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has played a major part in shaping the national narrative of the country. The Church historically played to be a major force in the construction of the political system of the State that fostered Ethiopian nationalism and the conception of the Ethiopian nation-state. The combination of church and state was an indissoluble alliance that controlled the nation from King 'Ezānā's adoption of Christianity in 333 A.D. until the overthrow of Haile Selassie in 1974. While no research or study about women's historical experiences of citizenship as subordinated subjects of this larger political narrative has been carried out, I believe that the close examination of the rhetorical construction of the 'female' and her feminized space, as defined and circumscribed in symbolisms of the Church, will prove useful to the construction of women's history and identity.

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<sup>62</sup> Desta Hagos is one of the few remaining women artists of her generation. She was a student of Gebre Kristos Desta and graduated from the Fine Art School in 1969. She still continues to exhibit her works in Ethiopia. Her works are heavily influenced by Gebre Kristos Desta and has not varied much during her long tenure in the art world.

In the first and only study of hagiographies of Ethiopian female saints, Selamawit Mecca said that there had been a growth in research on late antiquity in recent years “particularly in studies focused on the interconnected issues of gender, the body, sexuality and ascetism in medieval literature.” (Mecca, 2006, p.156) She said that the cultural importance of legends about saints often gets dismissed as untrustworthy and they often get relegated to the periphery of historical inquiry. She has argued that “the discussion of these texts is informed by the feminist literary approach to retrieve the representation of female voices from hagiographic literature, so heavily dominated by male authority and patriarchal values.” (ibid) Acknowledging that studies of gender in Ethiopia are often borrowed, Mecca (ibid) has also argued that “examining manuscripts will show the importance of reading religious texts for providing insights about gender relations as they are articulated today, and that hagiographies and their study provide new perspective for the study of gender relations.” Hence, the call for greater attention to manuscripts, hagiographies and traditional paintings as potential academic tools in accounting for women’s situation as ‘Other’ is important and useful in radically changing existing epistemologies.

It is from this perspective that I will look into the iconography of Mary, the bearer of our Lord, who is a central subject within the tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. I believe that the interrogation of gendered identities is imbued in social histories that I argue intersect in variables of established assumptions and are key in elucidating further the historical experiences of Ethiopian women. I argue that this approach contributes to further the understanding of prevailing ideas of the position of women in contemporary Ethiopian society. It is important to note that the critical examination of the social context of Ethiopian traditional art where the relationships between art and religion, priest and artist, and ritual and display are closely intertwined is an important body of research that has not been appropriately explored. It is beyond

the scope of this paper to investigate the influence of Ethiopian traditional art on the trajectory of Ethiopian modernism. A comprehensive body of research is tantamount to fully comprehend that link. This research that bases itself on Bisrat Shebabaw's work is a small and first attempt to explore and address this necessary dialogue in the context of constructing a historical meaning to modern Ethiopian women art. I believe that any analysis of modern Ethiopian women should encompass an analysis of the intersection between art history and social history as well as the innovation, convention, improvisation and tradition that are crucial to the making and shaping of modernity and modernism in Ethiopian art.

From this perspective, I will take one aspect of the mythology, the depictions of Mary in the visual articulation of the mythologies of the Church that are depicted on the beautiful wall illustrations of many churches and monasteries. Mary, from whose womb the most divine came forth in the flesh, she conceived without sex and hence gave birth without being corrupted since her son was God and he was born in the flesh without travail. She avoided what is innate to all mothers preserving the marks of virginity. She freed woman's nature from the first curse which was sex, fertility and divinity all intertwined together as the mother of a child and of God, giving birth without knowing man. Her multiple identities, therefore, are visually noted in emphatic articulation of tension, an object of fascination and of ambiguity.

Viewed from a male gaze, man as bearer of the look, the Virgin Mary is a woman as subject. She invokes on the active male gaze a strategy of femininity through notions of purity, fertility and godliness. On the passive female gaze, the Virgin deciphers the discomfiting issues of female sexuality where the subject ironically becomes objectified. Mary becomes, as Luce Irigaray (1985, p.20) says, "indefinitely 'other' in herself." In Irigarayan terms, this image is woman who completely subordinate to her role within the logocentric order. There is no possibility that she

might exist for and in herself. For Irigaray, she is the matter of creation, including the material of man's embodied existence and in this context, woman disappears.

Viewing of the Virgin is disrupted with the anxieties of uncertainty and vagueness of empowerment. Contested narratives emerge depending on the positions of the viewer. The experience is not so much one of looking at the image of Mary as being confronted with double reference of the idealized female representation, but also the obscene and profane invested within the irony of fertility, godliness and purity without sex, the first curse of woman as symbolized in Eve. This very depiction places the female body as enigma erecting a barrier between the body of the Ethiopian woman and the institutional context in which her body is situated. Precisely because this contradictory image of Mary finds expression and discursive truth in Ethiopian modernism, I suggest the importance of the gendered subculture of Orthodox mythology into giving insight into the broader fundamental challenge of historical cultural constructions of gender. A subculture that is implicit but not articulated manifests in the social imaginaries of the hegemonic patriarchal discourse of modernity.

As I have argued above, the very inscription of gender in Ethiopian ethnographic corpus is important to note in the way gender was treated in the Orthodox Christian texts. I believe that native views of gender are expressed in the vernacular culture through these texts. Again, as I have said above, my intervention of the idea of Mary is an attempt to analyze local interpretations that centers on the control of sexuality. Whether and under what conditions this paradigm is or is not justified depends on prevailing notions of reason. If prevailing reason is an ideal, abstract, universal, disembodied and coded as male, then the destabilizing and reconfiguring of the sanctified image of Mary becomes problematic. On the other hand, if the query is to challenge the mechanisms and effects of a dominant tradition of gender construction to

be culturally constructed and symbolically articulated, Mary as an image symbolizes a masculine order of solidity and unity of reason.

I have attempted to explore the nationalist imaginary discourse of gendered identities through the narratives of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its most central figure, the Virgin Mary. How then do female visual artists perform within this dynamic? My main interest in this research is to interrogate the visual articulation of Bisrat Shebabaw within the influence of such culture that necessitates attention to the significance of gender and sex role socializations, wherein women who resist the dominant discourse either by refraining from sex altogether, as would a spinster, or by having non-reproductive sex, as would a prostitute. It is a first attempt to interrogate women's visual art within a culture that reveres purity and at the same time fertility, the contradiction between the physical mortal female body and the desire for the divine sacred persona. I believe that these two contradictory enigmas of a mythical narrative have been assimilated through the legitimizing mechanisms of normative constructions of female identity. Viewed within this context, a reading of Bisrat Shebabaw's works is an attempt to reclaim the embodied reason reflective of what has been called 'the feminine' in Ethiopian culture.

During the 1980s a number of women artists assumed authorial confidence to handle diverse forms of expression, and their narratives represented a self that was inscribed into the social body to articulate an unresolved modernity. These artists were few in number. While their works continued to be understood in terms of the cultural foundation of the traditional and hegemonic discourse of 'woman,' their works somewhat interrogated a subjectivity that was existentially pitched. Artists like Elizabeth Habte-Wold and Kebedech Tekle-Ab whose education was informed by the military Marxist junta's communist feminist ideas attempted to deconstruct the patriarchy of gender and images of women as fetishized objects. Tekle-Ab's works later

changed to show the atrocities of repression after her long incarceration in a Somali prison that came about as she was fleeing the Derg regime through the Somali borders. Both Elizabeth Habte-Wold and Kebedech Tekle-Ab left the country to flee the repressive Marxist regime. The only significant female artist who remained in the country was Bisrat Shebabaw. I will focus on the works of Bisrat Shebabaw not only because she is one of the few women artists that is still producing a significant amount of work, but also because is one who has been in the country since she graduated from the Fine Art School in 1985, except for her brief absence from 1986 to 1989 to study abroad in the Soviet Union.

Shebabaw graduated from the Fine Art School in painting in 1985. After her return from the Soviet Union in 1989, she participated in the official art of the time just like her contemporaries Bekele Mekonnen and Behailu Bezabih. Her works then indulged in women workers and peasants. After the fall of the Derg, she started experimenting on different types of works, and enigmatic of all was and continues to be her powerful portrayals of women. Unlike many of the women artists who graduated from the Fine Art School who moved on to other careers or conformed to societal pressures of marriage and children, she remained active, consistently working on a diversity of subject matter and form. Her works bear her own face and story and seem to explore keys to the empowerment of women to healing and transformation through the arts. Shebabaw talks about emotion, music and particularly her mother who she has said played an important role in the expression of her work. She is an avid lover of classical music particularly that of Beethoven and music accompanies her every time she works on her paintings. Although the artist has insisted that she does not think of the various symbols in her work as sexually constructed concepts, I argue that the works leave a certain emotional affect on cultural attitudes on women.

What these two voices, that of the artist and the viewer hint, is a set of issues for consideration. What is the discursive construct of Ethiopian contemporary artistic production and does it build upon cultural traditions or reference to a specifiable concept of Ethiopian identity? Is the image of the self as 'female' and the social psychology of femininity portrayed in women's artistic practices? How does women's agency fare within the production of art? I believe that these issues are critical to fresh insights in the history and production of women's visual art and culture.

Indeed, the attempt to falsely rupture constructed images of the 'female' is at the crux of many contemporary African women artists' enterprises. The issues mentioned are increasingly negotiated by their works. The female body as imagined, manipulated and defined and the social and political situation that continues to repress women appear in many of their works. Alternative corporeal strategies which convert the body into the ultimate text and the body as the performing agent of exhibitor and exhibit have become central narratives in women's cultural productions. Unfortunately, in Ethiopia the historical and mythological past is so strong that a private experience of femininity is not articulated. The female body in Ethiopian culture is also an image distorted by the male gaze and not articulated by women female artists.

In the *Seen, the Unseen and the Imagined Private and Public Lives*, Sarah Graham-Brown (2003, p.513) said of Middle Eastern women that "segregation of space and control over the visibility of women were forms of patriarchal control which emphasized the need to channel and contain women's sexual powers." She said that in most Middle Eastern societies women are viewed as possessing powerful, even uncontrollable sexual passions and that it is the opinion of men that "women who are not kept under strict control appear, in this imagery, as objects of both fear and blame. Their sexuality needs to be channeled into marriage and their visibility controlled to prevent other men from succumbing to their powerful sexual urges. In this view, men's

sexuality is less problematic and they are offered numerous socially acceptable ways of indulging their sexual desire.” (Graham-Brown, 2003, p.514) Nuanced readings of issues such as the one Graham-Brown has raised would in Ethiopian artists also better define, historicize, and theorize not only women’s visual culture, but would also be useful in the sound methodological models for research of Ethiopian visual culture.

Icons of domesticity, fertility and purity have circumscribed the space of the first wave Ethiopian women modernists. Did later modernists delineate or mediate this space? Whether Shebabaw relates to the character and definition of the problematic of Ethiopian femininity as outlined above, her works are as much about gender politics as they are about art. To map a more comprehensive historical picture, she is the product of an awkward conjuncture of a society that respects purity as much as it does fertility. She is a product of a society that wrestles existence within the cornerstone of Mary’s lifelong virginity, and the manifestation of a patriarchal ideology that has a boundary of two opposing categories. One encompasses characteristics of morality, motherhood and asexuality while the other consists of those who are unethical, dangerous and erotic, what is often referred to as the virgin/whore dichotomy.

Indeed, Shebabaw has said that her works are not bound to cultural traditions or explorations of heritage or gender and that they do not identify the conceptual issues informing their practices. I argue that the above cultural production that effaces women or women’s agency is curious within the production of her work. Her works evidence the value of looking at visual culture through the lens of gender. They beg for a coherent reading of their isolation as well as their rigor and focus. While the act of creation can be a resistance strategy in recovering the power of the gaze, it is unfortunate that the few visible local women artists fear the ostracism of the dominant narrative. They instead would like to be framed in the passive and sanitized image of the dominant female imaginary.

Shebabaw's *Moonlight Sonata* is, (see Figure 5.4) according to the artist, influenced by her love of Beethoven's composition with the same title. "The eleven shaped canvases," said Rebecca Nagy (2007, p.88), "were painted while Bisrat listened to Beethoven...the sky and stars, beautiful fairy tales and childhood stories." Ironically, Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* was composed far from a case of a romantic moonlit night, but the composer's feelings towards a friend who prematurely died. Nevertheless, Shebabaw's images inconsistently scaled fragmentary notes allowing a reading of concepts of femininity.

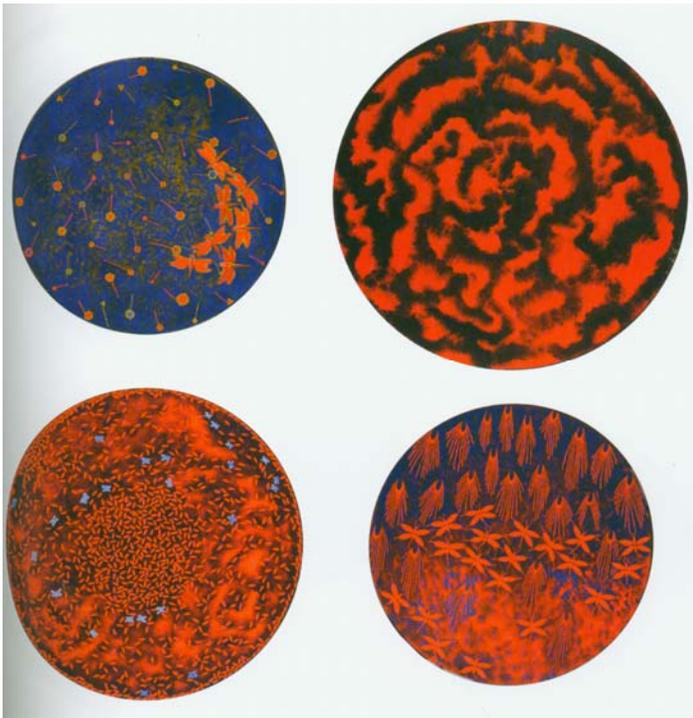


Figure 5.4 Bisrat Shebabaw, *Moonlight Sonata*, 2004-2006, acrylic and fluorescent paint on canvas, clockwise 30 x 30 in., 43 x 43 in, 32 x 30 in, 30 x 30 in. Retrieved from the catalogue: Harn Museum of Art (2007). *Continuity and Change, Three Generations of Ethiopian Artists*

This particular body of work exposes a strong moving light suggesting movement in a static image. The artist talks about the fragmented lines in this image as a representation of musical rhythms. It appears however, that the relationship between form and content

stimulates awareness of various types of enunciation. One's reading for this image is framed within the tension between the artist and the individual reader's freedom when it probes and searches through the image for its questions and lack, as well as for its answers and excess.

My reading is in an imagined reciprocity of feminist alliance, a self-representation, at once objectifying and subjectifying the 'Other' and of myself as woman. Thus, female readers are confronted with the ambivalence of our own gaze, or our own desire to 'see' through the image, and explore the very physical object in our hands; and yet we are also identified by our very femininity with the objects we see. It is from this perspective that I have found obvious references to my own self as woman as well to a general framework of Ethiopian femininity. The tension between ethical imperatives related to the pleasure power of the aestheticizing gaze also comes into perspective. The recurring images of sperm-like concepts in the image appear as entombed/encircled, imprisoned/embraced. The images also appear to be in a womb-like concept which forces the viewer to leap to a related image that resonates in the memory. The viewer's fragmented view of the body, and that of the womb that accepts pleasure, the womb that bears life, and the womb that is cursed comes into perspective. The fragmented images of the female body are thus negotiated between artist and viewer, an artist who is a bearer and a witness of a culture, but also timid to subvert essentialist notions of femininity.

As said above, most of Bisrat Shebabaw's other works indulge in images of women. Although she has said that these images are generally representative of the memories of her mother and others who have played a role in her life, they also allude to the struggle against burdened representation of women. The images are about strong women directly sitting erect on the canvas with beautiful traditional hairdos. Other images depict exaggerated curves of women's bodies. These images are portrayals of

women that directly stare at the viewer. They seem to contest and confront the viewer's gaze, a gaze that insists on their subservience and their silence, as they simultaneously redefine themselves as gendered identities. The eyes look unabashedly and with a confidence not often encountered in editions of the female form. The gaze that denigrated images of Ethiopian women is articulated with self-defined images empowered in their own selves. The garbs of these women are highlighted with non-diluted bold colors such as green and red, as if to signify a subtly engaged politics of defiance over the gaze and the beauty that the colors evoke simultaneously creating a longing to look. "Even in the worse circumstances of domination," said Bell Hooks (2003, p.213), "the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency."

Shebabaw's works of these women are also highly sexualized. Exaggerated images of sexually provocative women appear in these works, seeming to uncover an invigorated form of female sexuality and also seeming to say that the female can also be symbolic of power. (See Figures 5.5 and 5.6) These images are painted on gigantic canvases and seem to loom out from antagonistic hierarchies of gender as if to transcend insular and dominant cultures. The sacred feminine and the divine have hence evolved in this version of Shebabaw's works. Her work hence translates aspects of Ethiopian femaleness. While the artist has insisted on relating her work to the most mundane and domestic of female symbols, her works nevertheless attest to the traps of her gender where her female gaze has turned inward into the corporeal self and the cultural bias that underpinned its existential grounding.



Figure 5.5 Bisrat Shebabaw, *Untitled*, 2004, oil on canvas, 52 x 22 in., courtesy of Mr. Yasser Baghersh, Addis Ababa



Figure 5.6 Bisrat Shebabaw, *Untitled*, 2004, oil on canvas, 52 x 22 in., courtesy of Mr. Yasser Baghersh, Addis Ababa

It seems like the artist is struggling with the historical construction of masculinity and femininity. The psychic and symbolic context of oedipal socialization projects manifest themselves in manifold variations in her work despite the artist's nonchalance in seeing where and how this manifests. It is very difficult for Ethiopian women to talk about themselves as victims of history and culture. I looked into Bisrat Shebabaw's works to explore alternative readings into Ethiopian female artists that are simultaneously gendered and social constructs. My argument is that at the level of discourse, one has to recognize difference and malleability through the usage of resource in history, language and culture.

I brought into dialogue deeply embedded cultural concepts like the image of Mary to challenge not only the virtual absence of female artists from major Ethiopian art platform, but also the essentialized formation of an Ethiopian female identity and the discourse that has framed this identity. I looked into new tropes of oppositional narrative to critique gendered marginalization in Ethiopian modernity. Moreover, I believe that Shebabaw's works not only reveals Ethiopian feminist politics, but is also the subject of an avant-garde variation of contemporary art. It is an important genre of contemporary art that foregrounds a new formal variation not only in women's visual culture, but also in the larger context of Ethiopian contemporary art.

### ***Bekele Mekonnen***

Throughout his works, Bekele Mekonnen explores the use of uncanny parodies to articulate the various faces of destruction. His works, however, should be seen not in terms of the lamentation of poverty and its consequences, but rather as the symptom of the uncertainties generated by new global situations. Popular culture lies at the heart of Bekele's analysis where symbolism of expression lends itself to Ethiopian hyperbole as it simultaneously asserts and subverts authority. His works reflect on the social facts of

Ethiopian modernity encapsulating modernity's experience and perception in images which are fluid and constantly in becoming. Mekonnen received his formal training in sculpture from the Fine Art School and Moscow State Fine Arts Institute of the former Soviet Republic. I have briefly explained his artistic experience in the Soviet Union as experimental and defiant to state-controlled aesthetics. He only uses local materials, such as the iron plate and plough that are used for farming and cooking as well as wood grinders that are used to grind grain and coffee. He grew up in Debre Zeit, a city 40 km away from Addis Ababa known for its Air force base that was built by Emperor Haile Selassie.

Unlike many of his childhood contemporaries who saw the source of childhood pleasure in the military jets of Debre Zeit's Air Force Base, Mekonnen's youth was filled with experimental writing in love letters and poems. Today, he is also a prolific poet who manages to blur the line between the visual and the linguistic where his poems are just as good as his sculptures. Both interrogate the identity and function of art and particularly portray the paradoxical metaphors of the subject's experience within this dynamic. There are only a handful of artists in Ethiopian modern art history who have managed to formulate and negotiate their identities by using both the word and the image as critical toolboxes that mark the destabilization of their identities and as theoretical processes that make their identities no longer fixed and secure. Gebre Kristos Desta was one of these word-image extraordinaire who used the power of his poesis as much as his images to explore notions of identity within the constructs of 'location,' 'exile', 'displacement' and 'diaspora.' Although critical scholarship should recognize disparate cultural and political spaces as well as historical similarities and overlaps that are their lived condition, both Gebre Kristos Desta and Bekele Mekonnen are artists who through their words and images have created new roles and tropes of oppositional narrative in Ethiopian art and culture.

While their works, visual and poesis, are disparate from each other both in style and genre, both have nevertheless ultimately complicated the formation of identities and the unsettling relationships of power in a unique medley of poetry and image. They both have challenged the legacies of the past in all their complexity while opening various trajectories in articulating the problems of the present for people that are dispossessed, dislocated and traumatically ruptured. Gebre Kristos Desta articulated the complexities of individuality and community in both his poetry and his images in the heydays of Ethiopian modernism using experiences of citizenship as the focus of inquiry. Bekele Mekonnen on the other hand, has interrogated the complexities and multiplicities of high capitalism that has witnessed itself in the last thirty years of Ethiopian history. Both, nevertheless, are rare artists in Ethiopian modern art history who have meticulously used the power of the image and the word.

Mekonnen has attempted to construct new tropes of self-representation within the framework of the grey and dust of modernity that has created chaos and pandemonium to African subjectivity and the challenge of creating art within the traumatic history of Ethiopian subjectivity. For instance, in his exhibition entitled *Enkoklesh*<sup>63</sup>(see Figure 5.7) held at the Alliance Francaise in 2004, Mekonnen expressed allegories of ambiguities in the life of the Ethiopian subject. *Enkokelesh's* literal meaning is the riddle of life, but *Enkokelesh* is also an ancient Ethiopian question and answer game of riddles. One does not often get the answer to the questions posed in these games. In this exhibit, Mekonnen phrased questions through usages of history and culture to locate the present. How does one read the riddle of life? How does one define one's situation? How does one define citizenship? What does it mean to be Ethiopian in this riddle?

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<sup>63</sup> See Appendix for description.



Figure 5.7 Bekele Mekonnen, *Enkokelesh* 2004, smelted metal works, installation exhibition at the Alliance Francaise in 2004, courtesy of the artist

By posing these questions, one quickly realizes that marginal and fragmented subjects are not mutually constitutive but depict complexities of history. *Enkokelesh* is the riddle of marginality. It is the contestation for the end of the essential. It is the deconstruction of an imposed conception of Ethiopian identity, an enforced identity of the land of milk and honey, the cradle of civilization, the birthplace of the Queen of Sheba, and the rolling empire of the Solomonic dynasty.

It is the challenge to these century-old assumptions that have guided power's social, political and cultural analysis, and that have dismissed essential paradigms of poverty, destitution and degradation, which are burning issues relevant to an analysis of history. It is the criticality of the present as best understood in its relationship with the past. It is a challenge to the constant attempt by power to erase the relationship between the present and the past. It is the realization that this attempt to erase marginalizes the

vast majority of Ethiopians whose past and present lives are in conditions of despair and for whom the response that their glorious history should alleviate the traumas of their condition is no more plausible. It is in the whole the critical gaze of the predicament of present day Ethiopia where the riddle of poverty for the country's majority is continuously threatening notions of community, collective identity and historical memory. It weaves into a present politics of representation.

In another exhibition called *Chance and Choice*<sup>64</sup>(see Figure 5.8) that was held at Lela Gallery in March, 2007, Mekonnen again thematized his works on an old Ethiopian tradition, which can be translated and read in multiple ways, where he uses the concept of the chicken who can no longer lay eggs. The entrance to the gallery depicted a painting of the chicken held upside down. It is an Ethiopian century old routine where chickens that have stopped laying eggs are placed upside down with one of their feather placed on their beak; the chicken instantly starts to lay eggs. Many do not know why the chicken resumes life after this enactment, and yet this tradition continues to survive. This action of placing the chicken upside down eroticizes the chicken where the chicken once again resumes to giving life. While the biological dimension of the formation and negation of life is not at issue here, it nevertheless brings to light Mekonnen's insistence on traditional imaginative thinking where subjects interact with their environment effectively and with evocative imagination. The artist has said that "the high ideals of European modernism in Ethiopian intellectual thinking has nevertheless contributed to the epistemic erasure of vernacular imagination where today subjects are instead seduced by neo-colonial display and artifice." (Mekonnen, personal communication, June, 2009) Indeed, indigenous imaginaries have been replaced by a complex inner tension between the subject as an

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<sup>64</sup> See Appendix for description.

object of allegory and the object as the epitome of banality, one reproducing the other, however, in the convoluted web of the aftermaths of colonialism.

In both *Enkokelesh* and *Chance and Choice*, Mekonnen chose to focus primarily on local objects commonly used for production of food. In both exhibitions, Mekonnen's choice to use the plough and the iron plate creates a multilayered discourse of identity, sexuality, economic situation, social stance and political thought. In using common day images like the iron plough and the iron plate, he explores these objects as metaphors, both in form and material. In both exhibitions, one is inundated with the phallic form of the iron plough and the round shape of the iron plate that seem to represent gendered identities of his people, and also that simultaneously seem to represent their affinity to the earth from which the metal is smelted. He speaks of his people through the non-refined exterior, indigenous physicality and utility of the metal in its natural hues and tones, often exaggerated with the use of pigments to enhance the tones. Known to have been in use in Ethiopia in its present form for the past 3,000 years, Mekonnen's ploughs are curled at their tip indicating a sense of futility. The plough is traditionally made from metal that folds and molds to take form of a sharp instrument meant to plough the earth. However, these ploughs stand erect yet curled at the tip suggesting their hardy nature and yet their impotency. Mekonnen often portrays a certain amount of arrogance in their posture that perhaps signifies a sense of complacency and egotism felt amongst his people. For instance in *Enkokelesh*, these ploughs stand proud and vain. The ploughs are often found priming themselves in front of a mirror, in battle with one another, leading the crowd or sermonizing. They take on color to emphasize their political and social affiliation, stand together in unison back-to-back and furl and unfurl themselves to magnify their tension. (See Figure 5.8)

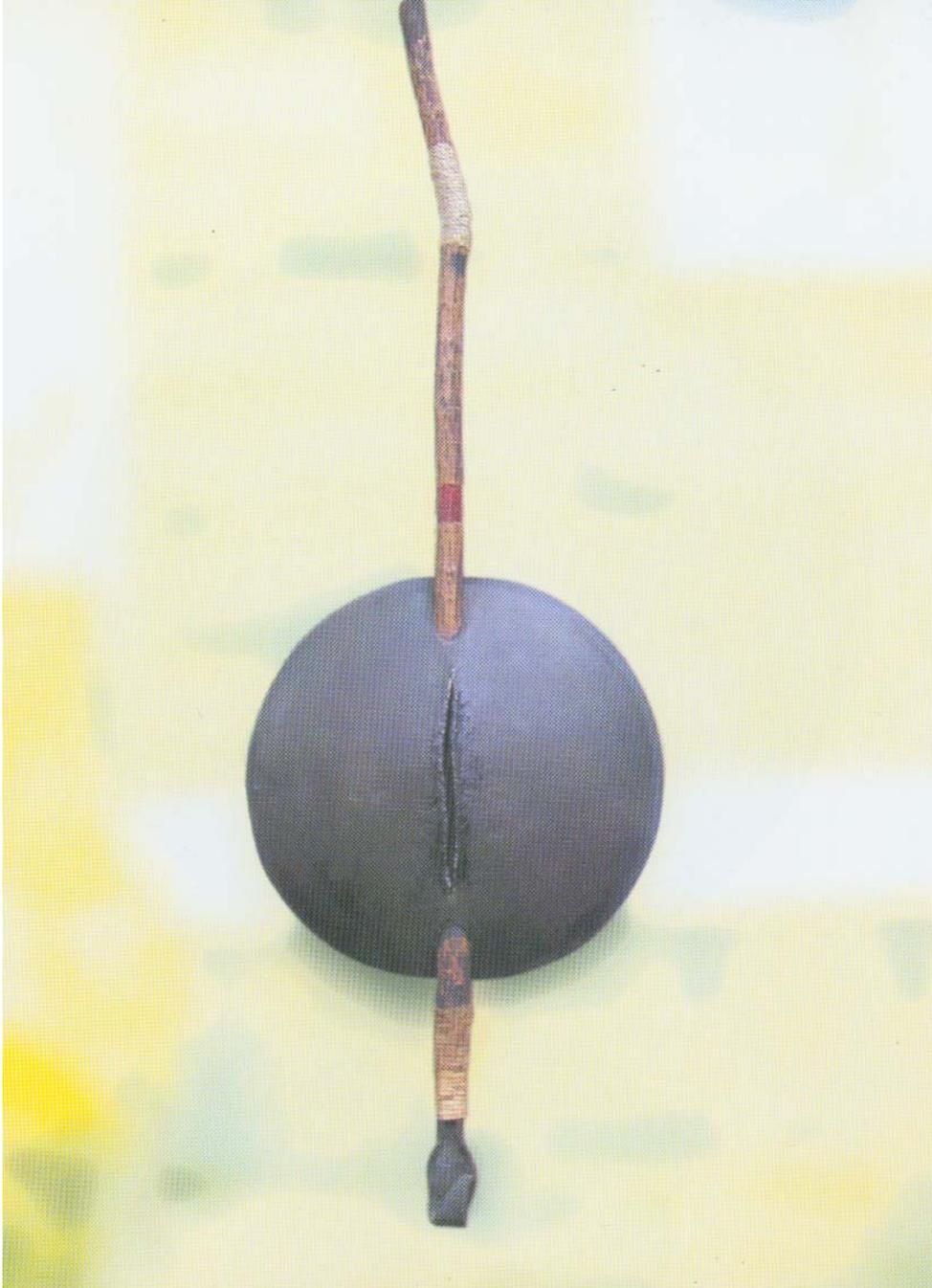


Figure 5.8 Bekele Mekonnen, *Chance and Choice*, 2007, mixed media wood and metal, courtesy of Mr. Menberu Lulu, Addis Ababa

They march in straight lines following the crowd with occasional turnarounds. As a cultivating tool, the plough moles into the earth, which the artist represents as iron plate. One piece in *Enkokelesh* pierces the plate with a raw wooden bone of its handle

and yet fails to make contact and misses its fertile area, forcing a hole through its surface in vain and violently ripping it open, while the earth watches this drama in silent anguish. (See figure 5.9)

Hence, *Enkokelesh* and *Chance and Choice* are narratives of the contemporary meaning of Ethiopian community and identity and the expression of self as understood through memory, materiality and place. In both works, the artist is saying that what is considered as banal in the construction of history, the plough, the plate and the chicken, is highly strategic that leaves out a range of important narratives that can contribute to the comprehensive understanding of history. The important thing therefore, is the understanding that history is being made even in trajectories of the banal and the mundane. Mekonnen's works signify that as modernism's vision of the moral life continues to filter itself in the pedagogy of Ethiopian cultural institutions, a whole vocabulary of material history is being decimated to make room for modernism's problematic epistemic contradictions. Mekonnen (personal communication, June, 2009) has said that "the historicity of experience has a direct bearing on the actual problematic of the everyday of the majority." Therefore, Mekonnen has attempted to articulate these problematic of Ethiopian history not only within the spatiality of the land, but in mundane experiences that have been part of the tradition for centuries. A restaging and a reproduction of the mundane not only underline the creative potential of an unthinkable resource, but also the experience of the purely cognitive subject who is also an active agent of history. The subject is not merely a spectator, but selects and attends to the unity of the subject-object relationship which cannot be entirely heterogeneous to the subject.

By bringing art to the level of the ordinary and the mundane, Mekonnen hence engages in the analogy of social transactions. He also emphasizes the representation of the Ethiopian subject as being produced and reproduced inside unchanging regimes of

representation. Moreover, he refers to the erasure of the liminal space that once negotiated various discursive spaces. Mekonnen articulates the Ethiopian subject as one who continuously positions and locates himself/herself in a metaphoric enactment of the effects of trauma that lingers on, a space where one loses a sense of belonging and yet where one continuously attempts to locate and re-locate himself/herself.

Elusive as it may be Africa is a complex intellectual construct that means different things to different people. But for sure, Africa is also a diverse and highly complex historical entity. In that contrast, whatever it is that we mean by “African” including of course African modernism, is the product of this historically complex entity and global presence. African as a concept may signal commonality in the sense of a shared historical experience, but it is by no means a product of cultural similarities. Then, what is African modernism? From the outset, two points should be emphasized: the plurality of modernity, even in its European context, and the realization that there are other modernisms beyond the European context. (Hassan, 2001, p.13)

Hassan was challenging traditional notions of modernism by introducing the ambivalence and plurality of modernism. Bekele Mekonnen has also challenged modernity’s assumptions that have guided the social, political and cultural analysis of modernism to articulate a vernacular modernity that narrates the complexities of his own society. The aftermath of colonialism has left the African continent, and particularly Ethiopia, with myriad challenges and with distorted processes of socio-historical development. Mekonnen’s works investigate modernity both as a concept to understand the world in terms of colonial history and to consider colonialism and imperialism as trajectories that have shaped the relationship between the West and the Rest. I believe that Bekele Mekonnen is one of the avant-garde contemporary artists of the last decade who has discussed the contentious space of African modernism. His pointed critique has addressed modernity and its discontents vis-à-vis the Ethiopian experience.

### ***Behailu Bezabih***

Behailu Bezabih graduated from the School of Fine Art and Design in painting in 1980. From 1981 up to the present, he has been working as an instructor at the Bethel Mekane Yesus Girls School in Addis Ababa. Although his works have changed of late, he has for many years worked on playful and childlike themes, perhaps because of his experiences with the children he teaches; perhaps also it was his loss of faith in the perverse history of the period when he studied art. He graduated from the Fine Art School immediately after the 'Red Terror.' His graduation work was called *Wode Dima*, a realist painting of a traditional church student and a work that ambiguously fulfilled the school's requirements. In an article in the Ethiopian Herald, Arefayne Hagos (1989) talked about Bezabih's graduation work:

Behailu Bezabih, a young but mature artist, dwells not only on the present but back to the pre-Axumite period to bring to attention our rich legendary heritage to the public. In Behailu's works are included Sabaen alphabets, geez numbers and alphabets which the artist believes are attractive in form, and which occupy some of his canvases.

As discussed in the previous chapter, these vague graduation works prevailed among those of all of his contemporaries. It seems that Behailu wanted to completely break away from the Fine Art School by repudiating his training. Through these childlike works, one is led to the earliest circumstances of existence where the rational or consequent becomes distant and where the association of art and childhood suggests a metaphysical validity of other truths. The children's imagination liberated him where their innocence and playfulness was not burdened the same way. The playful in these

works was indifferent to strict structure. Of his exhibition at the Bag Factory in South Africa in 2001, David Koloane<sup>65</sup> (Exhibition Catalogue, 2001) said:

At a glance Behailu's works bears the deceptive appearance of a children's storybook with its vibrant and daring palette and abstract figuration. A closer examination, however, reveals kaleidoscopic associations and layerings bound together by a magical painterly technique and complex compositions, which sing about life's simplicities. The zest for life permeates Behailu's work.

Art criticism says that childlike art has always been an objective of avant-garde art. It is only when the avant-garde artist finds the child in himself that he can be truly avant-garde. It is said that it took Picasso a lifetime to learn how to paint like a child, to make an art that was close to the origins of life and thus as original as life. Bezabih's works also spoke to the masses rather than the individual esthete, eager for a sublime experience from the lion's share. In devolution of mastery, style, sophistication and refinement, Bezabih's works of children deliberately abandoned the sublime of the esthete to get at something more fundamental. The primitivism of these images therefore suggested an attempt to get back to elementary principles and existential veracities. Mahlet Berhane of *Capitol* newspaper commented on these works, saying: "Most of Behailu's paintings depict scenes that show a mixture of playful presentations of daily life impregnated with vivid messages. By looking at his paintings one can observe his love for children and their influences on him, an aspect that is excessively manifested in his works." (Berhane, 2002)

On the other hand, his works after 2004 have dealt with the ambivalent construction of identities and with the way identities have been constituted in the

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<sup>65</sup> David Koloane is a South African writer, art critic, artist and curator. His art and work reflects on the socio political issues of South Africa after apartheid. Koloane met Behailu Bezabih in South Africa when Bezabih was doing an artist in residency at the Bag Factory in South Africa. He wrote this note on the brochure of Bezabih's opening exhibition.

experience of post colonial subjects. Weaving ideas and issues about place and identity, Bezabih's recent works explore the problematics of crossing borders by combining a personal and political message in a particularly significant way. Since his graduation from the Art School, Bezabih has traveled to many major institutions of the Western world to participate in residency programs, workshops and seminars, and in some cases to exhibit his works. The tribulations of obtaining visas are situated in these works within a larger context, central to both a personal identity and a political identity. Indeed, the definition of colonized subjectivity has been the focus for much of cultural studies where the discipline has been constructed in reaction to colonialism and its aftermath, and where much of the theory challenged has essentialized concepts of identity within a strategic and positional structure of representation.

For instance, in his landmark essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall (1996, p.225) spoke of identity, or identities, as belonging to the future as well as to the past when he said: "Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past." Hall's comments were made as part of a larger discussion of Caribbean cinema defined by the diaspora experience. Much of the identity discourse of the non-Western 'Other' has hence focused on diasporic identities that have been excluded from mainstream Western cultural institutions. Theorists like Stuart Hall have played an important role in the discursive effects and implications that have been far-reaching to contexts of cultural representation where the dialogue has set out various discursive boundaries. The politics of identity where identity gets de-centered and systematically elusive is nevertheless even more complex in the postcolony.

While diaspora identities produce and reproduce themselves through transformation and difference, the construction of identities in the postcolony is a

relationship of domination that takes on a different shape where the postcolony remains unmoved in its relation to the West. The blindness of the West to Africa's physiognomy has made Africa what Achille Mbembe (2001, p.106) has called "an object of experimentation". In *The Contribution of Achille Mbembe to the Multi-Disciplinary Study of Africa*, Gerard Ralphs (2007) said:

The West holds and controls the body of Africa, he negotiates and bargains with Africa's presence in the world, as if Africa were not able to do so himself, as if Africa were not a human being at all. Africa is, thus, not only reduced from the human being he is to the mere condition of an enchained, an enslaved animal: a beast.

If one passes by the United States Embassy in Addis Ababa, one is confronted with the notion of absolute 'Otherness' that is described above. People are lined up to supposedly attain their passage to freedom. At issue here is not that most are attempting to flee from the economic despondency of Africa that the West is so much responsible for, but the humiliation and harshness that the subject encounters to be granted this authorization. People are treated like animals with harsh interrogation techniques and many times false accusations of forgery and deception. To the official behind the counter who represents the West, the African subject is constituted in a guise of genocide and destitution as what Mbembe (2001, p.103) again has described as "monsters lying in wait, corpses coming and going on the tide, infernal powers, threats of all sorts, abandonments, events without response, monstrous couplings, blind waves, impossible paths, terrible forces that everyday tear human beings, animals, plants, and things from their sphere of life and condemn them to death: all these are present."

It is no wonder then that this subject deserves the cruelty bestowed to monsters and animals and does not deserve the dignity of a human being. It is this spite of the

visa officials that attempts to articulate itself in Behailu Bezabih's works called *Mekdim*, (see Figure 5.9) an exhibition held at the Alliance Ethio Francaise in 2005.<sup>66</sup>



Figure 5.9 Behailu Bezabih, *Mekdim*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 15 x 15 in., courtesy of the artist

Many of the images in these works portray people who have turned their back. Bezabih (personal communication, May, 2009) has said:

In our culture, turning your face around shows either disappointment or humiliation. I started doing this work after I was denied visa to go to Ireland. I was accused of intending to stay in Ireland although I had no such objective. This incident invoked certain anger in me and regurgitated all my experiences to attain visas to the countries I had traveled. I was reminded of all the times I was held in embassy waiting rooms, often these waiting areas are outside the embassy compounds.

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<sup>66</sup> See Appendix for description.

There were times when I waited whole days just to see someone and often times after I was able to see someone, I was either interrogated with unfair accusations which one cannot be angered about since one can be denied visa or I was told to come back to wait another whole day in these dreadful waiting areas. Often, I saw other Europeans enter and leave swiftly without my tribulation.

In *Mekdim*,<sup>67</sup> Bezabih therefore interrogated this deprivation of power that is so prevalent of the African life. The subsequent loss in African modernity is this discourse of alienation. The West's simple political reaffirmation of black humanity is thus exhibited in these embassy halls. In *Beyond*,<sup>68</sup> (see Figures 5.10 and 5.11) an exhibition held at the Italian Cultural Institution in 2009, Bezabih framed his work in the context of identities that both produce and are produced by a specific cultural environment. A collage of five canvases loomed out of the gallery hall. These collages are made of old newspapers collected from homes that were destroyed to give way to road constructions, where many people are and continue to be displaced. Although the government gives compensation for these homes, often these compensations are not enough for purchasing other homes in the city since real estate prices have skyrocketed. The influxes of foreigners who are representatives of hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are emblems of neo-liberalism, have also exacerbated the problem of housing and many who are displaced are forced to settle for affordable places that are many miles out of the city. Safe and simple refuges no longer exist where boundaries keep being resituated. A sense of exile and displacement and a search for roots is encountered in one's own country where identity is thus consistently negotiated and re-negotiated. Road construction has become a fetish of modernity

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<sup>67</sup> Mekdim is an Amharic word that means the beginning of something. It is usually used in books as a preface or beginning of the book.

<sup>68</sup> See Appendix for description.

because of neo-liberal models of modernization that favor infrastructure over everyday life.



Figure 5.10 Behailu Bezabih, *Beyond*, 2008, mixed media collage on canvas, 50 x 15, courtesy of the artist

Bezabih's collages also appear as a memory within a memory where the broken rubric of the past is depicted in the newspapers themselves. The images of the past, such as the photographs of Haile Selassie appear as if to remind one of historical traces that refused to be erased. The collages also portray bird nests that hang tightly on the first canvas and slowly disintegrate on subsequent canvases to completely get truncated on the fifth canvas. Bezabih has talked about these nests saying: "Once a unified and stable identity is fractured because of modernity's chaos...one tries to leave behind the chaos in the homeland and migrates to another place, only to find out that he/she is again confronted to the confusion and rifts of diaspora identity." (Bezabih, personal communication, May, 2009)



Figure 5.11 Behailu Bezabih, *Beyond*, 2008, mixed media collage on desk wood, 10 x 15 in., courtesy of the artist

Multiple manifestations that pertain to contemporary Ethiopian identity formation thus prevail in Bezabih's complex works. Far from being total, Bezabih challenges the contemporary social and political phenomena of Ethiopian subjectivity as well as the constitution of the African 'self' through fundamental problems of social reality in Africa.

***New Media Works: The Works of Salem Mekuria: Deluge and Ruptures: A Many Sided Story***

***Deluge***

Film is a new phenomenon in Ethiopia. Despite the problems posed by inadequate infrastructure for film-making and a lack of financing, Ethiopian film production in the last five years has nevertheless grown with unusual speed. This growth, however, has not translated to qualitative standards. Ethiopian filmmakers continue to indulge in recreational cinematic experience with themes that deal with the

moral dilemmas of love, such as infidelity and extreme romantic obsession. It should be noted, however, that despite all the hurdles African filmmakers are challenged with, diaspora film makers like Salem Mekuria and Haile Gerima have presented critical and provocative works that articulate the political, social and historical processes of modern Ethiopia. Although the focus of this dissertation is on local artistic and cultural producers, I believe it is noteworthy to look into the works of Salem Mekuria and particularly her work *Deluge* that received significant critical attention. *Deluge* revisits and reevaluates the complex issues that confronted one unique juncture of Ethiopian history that this dissertation attempted to address in Chapters One and Three and Four.

Although a personal chronicle of the artists' experience, *Deluge* simultaneously looks into a variety of critical perspectives by depicting a shared experience of a generation of Ethiopians who lived through the 1960s and 1970s in a country that went through mayhem and atrocity. Along with *Deluge*, I will also look into *Ruptures, A Many Sided Story*, a triptych that was presented in the exhibition *Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes*, presented as part of the 50<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition, *La Biennale di Venezia, Dreams and Conflicts*. I believe this would give a good glimpse not only of the artist's dexterity in experimenting on alternative structures of film making, but also her continued effort to reflect and integrate the social problems of Ethiopian people who persistently struggle to become agents of their own history.

I attempted in Chapters One and Three to elucidate the rise of the modern intellectuals and their restless and impatient strive to change imperial ideology and the state of the monarchy. The rise of the Ethiopian Student Movement that galvanized a mass uprising in 1974 culminated from the ideals and aims of these intellectuals. It is important to discern the history of the period and how different factions performed during this time in order to understand Salem Mekuria's *Deluge*. During the 1960s, the

student movement was a politically charged union that championed the interests and struggles of the oppressed. It rallied under a Marxist-Leninist political thought and played an important role in the ideological struggle against feudalism and imperialism. Ideological disputes had nevertheless arisen within the Ethiopian Student Movement in Europe and North America in the late 1960s. Although the movement at home and abroad generally stood for the conviction that radical change was needed and that the Marxist-Leninist approach to change was the desired tool, interpretations of Marxist-Leninist theory on issues such as the 'national question' had created conflict and discord in the movements in Europe and North America. In 1968, the first clandestine movement known as the Pan-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISONNE) came out inside the union of Ethiopian students. The majority of its constituents were studying in European universities.

A year later, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) emerged; EPRP advocated armed struggle. Meanwhile, after the 1974 mass uprising, power had been usurped by a military junta called the Derg. The Derg did not have a clearly defined ideology, but was swept away by the engulfed radical discourse of Marxist-Leninist thought. It initially tried to win the support of the Ethiopian left by declaring its various socialist programs. Nevertheless, it became increasingly clear that the Derg had assigned only itself to be the sole revolutionary vanguard. The EPRP soon became the Derg's chief antagonist, and by 1976 the EPRP had become engaged in a systematic campaign to undermine and discredit the Derg. During the late 1970s, the Derg rallied the support of MEISONNE, and MEISONNE entered into a strategic alliance with the Derg. It was then that MEISONNE and EPRP went into mutual annihilation, which first materialized in their newspapers and pamphlets but later moved to the streets in the form of bloody assassinations and counter-assassination campaigns. The differences between MEISONNE and the EPRP were fundamental. The EPRP pressed for an

uncompromising people's democracy that necessitated the ousting of the Derg, while MEISONNE believed in giving some time to the Derg to return to the barracks. The Derg and MEISONNE also had a falling out later in 1979 when the Derg went into a campaign of annihilation and destruction to weed out all parties that contested its power. Ethiopia became a killing field in 1978 and 1979 when thousands were slaughtered against a campaign called the 'Red Terror.'

Who were the real victims and who were the architects? It is this poignant paradox and perplexity that Salem Mekuria expounds in *Deluge*. This film is hence a personal story of this epoch of Ethiopian modern history. The main characters in the film are Mekuria's brother Solomon, who is a member of the EPRP, and her best friend Negest, who is a staunch campaigner of MEISONNE. Solomon and Negest have a common thread; Mekuria, who is Solomon's sister and Negest's best friend. They know each other from childhood. They all joined the student movement, Negest and Solomon in the U.S.S.R where they were studying and Mekuria in North America where she was a student. All had common ideals. All were perturbed by the vagaries of their homeland and all were convinced that change was necessary and vital. All were young and idealist. All thought that Marxism-Leninism was the only true source for justice and all genuinely began their optimistic and romantic search for equality, liberty and integrity. It is later in the struggle that they take individual paths. Negest joins MEISONNE while in the U.S.S.R., and later in Ethiopia, to become its leading female member and its notorious advocate. Solomon joins the EPRP to become MEISONNE's chief adversary. Solomon believes in a Che Guevara-type of guerilla warfare and firmly believes the EPRP to be the advance guard of the Ethiopian revolution. Solomon and Negest became irreconcilable enemies who would kill each other without hesitation, were they to confront each other in the battle field. Both were fighting for the same cause and in 1978 they both faced the same enemy. Both are accused by the military junta of selling

the cause and both are imprisoned and killed by the Derg. Along with them, thousands are maimed and killed in what was unimagined even by those who initiated the violence as a legitimate tool of political struggle.

Salem Mekuria begins this one hour personal documentary by talking about her daughter's interest in Ethiopian history. She begins the film with her daughter's query of Solomon's death, which Mekuria says prompted her to deal with the painful experiences of this period. It is unusual for African film makers to deal with such complex social and political issues without creating fictional characters to tell their stories. Through personal interviews with her immediate family and close friends, Salem Mekuria nevertheless situates the historical and social context of a failed revolution through a personal diary that unfolds a vivid reenactment of the period. Using her first person voice as the narrative medium, she weaves together the personal recollection of her brother and her best friend with those of their families and friends, blending narrative storytelling techniques with the conventions of traditional documentary. One can say that *Deluge* is an autobiographical documentary in its use of subjectivity in light of the convergence of autobiography and documentary. In the beginning of the film, the viewer also sees shots of the filmmaker on her editing table fitting her personal narrative, figuratively placing herself in the film. It seems that Mekuria was also problematizing her own role in the issues. She has said:

In making *Deluge*, I wanted to contemplate on the role of the individual in perpetuating national tragedies, be it famine, war or political terror, by re-visiting family tragedies in my home, Ethiopia. Focusing my lens on and searching through my own history, I sought personal experiences that illuminated universal truths. What motivates us to love or to destroy? What turns good to evil, nobility to cowardice, and vision to nightmare? Where do the ranges in-between reside? I have no answers but I offer this work as a tool for looking back to get a sense of how we can look forward to a future in which responsibility and choice inform our conduct. (Mekuria, personal communication, August, 2004)

Through this personal and self-reflexive narrative, Salem Mekuria has chronicled a captivating story, a critical evocation and analysis of the past and present as well as the fragile notion of nation and identity. *Deluge* is personal, individual, and autobiographical like a confession or an intimate diary. It is a narrative film, yet at the same time a documentary.

### ***Ruptures: A Many Sided Story***

The Orthodox Trinitarian theology reveals the divinity or the essence of God as the trinity of persons existing one in another in a unity of being; the Father is the unique source, the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds. The creation of the world established a borderline between God and his creation. This imaginary boundary between the two is neither one nor the other, but something completely atypical simultaneously connecting and separating the one and the other. The triptych in Salem Mekuria's video installation presented as part of the 50<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition, *La Biennale di Venezia, Dreams and Conflicts* refers to this iconic representation of the trinity in the Ethiopian Orthodox faith. Her work proposes the pervasiveness of this representation in the praxis of Ethiopian art and life. In this triptych, Mekuria has challenged the universal and linear narrative of Ethiopian history. Her work acknowledges the varieties and complexities of Ethiopian culture and questions the ability of any single philosophical rationalization to be the primal context of conventional value. It insists on a dialogue as a solution to the ongoing conflicts, recurring famines and repressive governments that make up the existential dilemma of the Ethiopian's meaning and being.

The triptych, which runs for twenty minutes, simultaneously presents different images from different junctures in Ethiopian history. Mekuria focuses her fragmented lens on personal reflections that mirror the national and individual experience under

three regimes spanning over forty years; Emperor Haile Selassie deposed in 1974; Mengistu Haile Mariam whose dictatorship ended in 1991, and the present government of Meles Zenawi. She juxtaposes events and images against each other and seizes beautiful images of the country as well as horrifying ones that are synchronized concurrently. The viewer is at once delighted and dismayed, captivated and at the same time saddened by the multifarious nature of Ethiopian modern history. The random phenomenon of light, perspective and perception gives the triptych continuity in aesthetic and intention. The artist critically reveals decentered episodes and the monstrous paradox of the continuity of interrupted pieces. In this triptych, Mekuria talks about a present of unresolved pasts, an ambivalent future, a disorderly coexistence of tradition and contemporaneity and nuances of modernity that are appropriated and debased. While the content of the triptych is disturbing, it also depicts a visual structure which speaks directly to the viewer's aesthetic sense. Through this irony, Mekuria also reminds the viewer that beauty is a powerful antidote to a disaffected world.

### ***The Photographic Images of Michael Tsegaye***

Photography and new media as art is relatively new in Ethiopia's artistic scene. While there are few photographers who use the medium as a means of artistic investigation and response to the changes taking place in the social and cultural life of their daily lives, new media artists are fewer in number and are comparatively unrefined. New media works that raise questions, propose new meanings, and represent the country's complexity are literally missing from artists' works. Artists, nevertheless, have recently begun to use photography as a means of provoking thought and controversy with fresh approaches to a variety of photographic compositions. Among the few photographers whose work receives serious attention is Michael Tsegaye. Before going into the works of this particular artist, it is noteworthy to give historical

perspective to Ethiopian photography, not just to establish the photograph as a cultural object, but also to understand the use of the camera in documenting the history of the country. Until the coming of the Derg, photography played an important role in documenting the period of Ethiopian political history.

Photography came to Ethiopia in 1879 when King Menelik II arranged to employ a Swiss craftsman to help him in the modernization of his country. Alfred Ilg, a graduate of the Zurich Polytechnic, served for many years as both technician and diplomatic advisor to the Emperor. Ilg was also a keen photographer who took many photographs of the Emperor. One day Menelik summoned Ilg and said:

I have heard something about you which was very bad of you, and of which I surely would not have believed you capable. At the same time it is so ridiculous, so improbable, that I would not have believed it at all had I not heard it from trustworthy people. I have been informed that without my knowledge you made me very small, and stuffed me into a black box with my whole town, together with houses, people and mules. And, what is even more unbelievable, in this box I was standing on my head with my legs in the air. (Menelik as cited in Pankhurst, 1996, p.34)

Ilg, according to his biographer Conrad Keller, was surprised by this accusation and found himself obliged to explain to the Emperor the principal laws of optics and the monarch “finally understood the workings of a photographic camera.” (Pankhurst, 1996, p.34) Ilg’s photographs of Menelik II and his court consist of compelling royal portraits and evocative scenes of daily royal life. Court photography continued during the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie and the most significant works during this period were made by the Boyadjian family who were of Armenian origin and who arrived in Ethiopia in 1904. The images taken by Alfred Ilg and the Boyadjian family are of considerable importance in increasing the understanding of the time in images that shaped versions of the past. These images have enabled Ethiopian historians to explore alternative ways of composing, presenting and contesting historical knowledge.

A substantial number of Ethiopian photographers emerged between the 1930s and 1950s following the increasing availability of camera technology. Photography became fashionable and photographers captured images that were as telling as portraits and as conventional as passport identifications. This intense craze for photography and its distinct blueprint was also a remarkable phenomenon throughout the African continent, an outcome of a period of optimism from newly obtained independence, an optimism of people who considered themselves as part of the modern world and of people who appropriated photography to mark their belonging in the modern culture. The interest in photographic portraits especially proliferated all throughout the African continent. Notwithstanding regional variations, the urgency of the portrait became a unanimous objective. Photographers like Meissa Gaye from Senegal and Malik Sidibe and Seydou Keita from Mali set up studios to take on portraits of stately men from prominent families and beautiful images of elegant women adorned with dazzling jewelry and ornate coiffures. Ethiopian photographers set up numerous photography studios and also followed the same enthusiastic path for photography.

Studio photography proliferated throughout cities in Ethiopia and the images of ordinary subjects were captured, subtly punctuated by bold background images. These images were taken by self-taught photographers who believed that the photographer was the keeper of memory and that photographers worked for posterity. This zest in photography from both the ordinary subject and the photographer came to an end when the military junta took over in 1974. Photography was used for propaganda purposes during the Derg's revolution and any other usage of the medium was seen as bourgeois and reactionary. The role of the photographer as an artist did not come until much later after the Derg. The Fine Art School, the only institution of art in the country, did not and still does not offer training in the medium. The presence of photography in artistic practice therefore came about from self-taught artists. Few artists began to explore its

social roles as a medium of representation without the training of the medium in contemporary art practice. One such artist who used photography to find meaning in a continually evolving cultural dynamics is Michael Tsegaye. Tsegaye (personal communication, October, 2009) has said:

As a photographer, I try as much as possible to escape being pigeonholed. This is especially relevant as an African – and Ethiopian – photographer. I place myself among my peers (photographers and painters) across the world. As an Ethiopian I do not have a duty to focus my lens on suffering alone. My life, and that of other African artists, is not predicated on poverty and hardships, although they are common sights. Rather I seek to understand my life and standpoint in the 21st century and express these through art. As an Ethiopian I approach art free from constraints. Ethiopia has maintained her culture, language and traditions for centuries in a world that has been continually changing and subject to the (sometimes positive, sometimes negative) involvement of other countries, cultures and ideologies. Perhaps this lack of contact to the outside world has contributed to Ethiopia's underdevelopment, but it has also ensured that Ethiopia's 'voice' has never been corrupted.

Michael Tsegaye graduated in painting from the School of Fine Arts and Design in 2002, but gave up painting when he developed an allergy to oil paint. He found his passion in photography to express a very individual voice. Tsegaye's works particularly focus on the dynamics of rapidly changing nuances of the social change that is facing his country. In the last ten years, Ethiopia has witnessed massive transformations in the area of development that have resulted in new social conditions. This notion of development has brought about uncompromising changes in social structures in which traditional networks and strategies are literally decimated. Massive numbers of people have been displaced to the outskirts of cities to accommodate road constructions and high-rise buildings. Neighborhoods have been dismantled and neighbors who have lived together for decades are separated. Along with their separation came the obliteration of profound and necessary community organizations like *idir* (a

neighborhood organization that is set up to help each other in times of a crisis like death). Small shopkeepers that have maintained their livelihoods from street shoppers are suddenly thrown out of business and forced to live in destitution in the suburbs. Watching these changes, Michael Tsegaye became interested in capturing the changes of development and the corollary reality of actual lives that have been challenged with these changes. The very nature of modern existence in Ethiopia and its implications are documented in the images of Michael Tsegaye.

In the photo series entitled *Taxi*, (2005) (see Figure 5.12 and 5.13) Tsegaye juxtaposes the old and the new, the modern represented with flickering lights of new high-rise buildings reflecting onto the taxis that navigate the city with the destitution and poverty that has historically been the city's landscape.



Figure 5.12 Michael Tsegaye, *Taxi*, 2005, gelatin print, courtesy of the artist



Figure 5.13 Michael Tsegaye, *Taxi*, 2005, gelatin print, courtesy of the artist

In these images, the artist seems to suggest the need for a more flexible strategy to confront the existential condition of the alienation of modernity. Tsegaye's allusion to the ambivalence of modernity is again portrayed in his series *The City and its Ruins* (2009). (see Figure 5.14, 5.15 and 5.16) Here, the artist puts forward the inner spirit of the people. In a series of erratic lines of light falling back into space, the artist seizes images of ordinary subjects who are confronted with the insecurity and ambiguity of modernity. Along with the images of ordinary people, Tsegaye presents images of old shanty communities next to sites of construction of mega high rise buildings. Here again, we see images of the old and the new, the modern and the long forgotten, shuffled with images of impoverishment and survival. Tsegaye's images are a critique to modernity's connoted progress, sophistication and growth. The artist creates an abstracted point of view of ordinary folks that engage and entice the viewer.



Figure 5.14 Michael Tsegaye, *the City and its Ruins*, 2009, gelatin print, courtesy of the artist



Figure 5.15 Michael Tsegaye, *the City and its Ruins*, 2009, gelatin print, courtesy of the artist



Figure 5.16 Michael Tsegaye, *the City and its Ruins*, 2009, gelatin print, courtesy of the artist

Not only does the viewer dialogue with the meaning, purpose and context of the image, but the eye also finds delight in the evocative nature of the composition, texture and detail of the work. As Elleni Centime Zeleke said:

Thus, in all of his photographs Tsegaye is first and foremost attracted by the beauty of the image. But for him beauty is not always positive. Many of the most impressive and haunting images that he has created have been of despair and adversity. However, Tsegaye also seems loathe to apply only his understanding to these pictures, and so foreclose other meanings. Rather, through carefully playing with presence and absence, light and shadow, Michael Tsegaye opens up his world to the sympathetic viewer.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> This citation comes from an unpublished work. The work is expected to be published in June 2010 as part of the proceeding of the conference, *Imaging Ethiopia: Modernity and Empire* held at Cornell University in May 2006.

In an artistic genre that is still new for many Ethiopian artists, Michael Tsegaye has demonstrated that photography could be legitimately artistic even when using its medium in the most physically and realistic way.

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## Conclusion

Ethiopia's humanities discourse has for the most part refrained from re-periodizing modernity in terms of Ethiopia's historical experiences along with the trajectories criss-crossing the Western mainstream. The intellectual and political history of Ethiopia has been totally absorbed by an authoritative academic ontology that dismisses the maze of contestation and opposition of modernist studies. Imaginatively exploring distinct pasts and discourses that are harnessed to powerful social sources and that are forged within wider matrices of power, I have attempted in this dissertation to critically engage the different ways of negotiating the validity of social and political thought of Ethiopian modernity and modernism. The borders between disciplines and divisions of knowledge have become increasingly permeable. Such cross-disciplinary work in the field of modernity and modernism has produced exciting works of interdisciplinary examination in modernist epistemology, ontology, and representation.

There are many interesting cultural conceptions that are central to the production and consumption of meaning in the history of Ethiopian modernity and modernism. What cultural work do these meanings perform in the genealogy of Ethiopian modernity and modernism? How did they manifest themselves in diverse temporal and spatial situations? How did power relations condition the production, dissemination, and reception of these notions? These are questions that are left unexamined in Ethiopian intellectual thought. For instance, the nation imagined was an important construct in the making of Ethiopian modernity. The ephemeral, intense and elusive notion of the nation and its affect on the rendition of modernity was discussed in Chapter One.

The historical condition of Ethiopian modernity and modernism necessitates the coming into discourse of issues such as the imagination of the nation which are influential and significant components of cultural analysis. These types of conceptions are categories that govern the specificity of the political and cultural route that ultimately interprets the configuration of Ethiopian modernity and modernism. In Ethiopia, the broader malaise of intellectual thought is its anchorage to historical causation within a historicist mindset that finds empiricism and objectivity as its *raison d'être*. This dissertation is therefore a first attempt that navigates the multiple points of Ethiopian intellectual and aesthetic realms from a cultural, historical and comparative context.

## APPENDIX

### Chapter 2

#### *Figure 2.1 and 2.2*

#### *The Nourishers Series: Sketch and The Grass Spirit*

Art critic Solomon Deressa called these images *the ingenious infusion of spirit into ostensibly prosaic objects*. Boghossian's fascination with the subliminal is particularly manifested in the pastel, gouache and ink series of the *Nourishers*. All twelve works of the series were completed in Paris between 1963 and 1966. Nine of these works are unaccounted for and are only available in photographic images. The gouache gives these works an opaque and matt feeling and the ink gives it a striking simplicity. Boghossian uses the ink in a loose, free flowing style by which the viewer, through the symbolical correspondences, can easily travel from the tangible world to its spiritual and supernatural parallel. It was in this series that Boghossian found a way of using the subconscious as a genealogy that tried to study how it could penetrate existing society.

Richly textured, the series is allegorical and allusionary with inanimate and animate objects saturating the surface and depicting themselves as if they were conceptually linked to multifaceted forms. With physical and spiritual reality colliding in his consciousness, Boghossian's visionary trepidation of a higher reality for humanity is apparent in this series. This series is a metaphysical conception of art in which images and forms possess vital force. His inspiration came essentially from the cosmos. Fragmented and simultaneously connected, these images speak of a spiritual African and African diaspora self image, by presenting the synthesis of this particular culture's understanding of the creative principle and its place in the cosmos.

**Figure 2.3**  
***Night Flight of Dread and Delight***

Completed while he was living in Paris, *Night Flight of Dread and Delight*, which is currently owned by the North Carolina Art Museum, is one of Boghossian's masterpieces. Oil on canvas with collage, this piece is a multi-media composition showing manifold views of various objects. It symbolizes the desire to reconnect with African heritage by many African artists who lived in Paris at that time. Their diversity of expression emerged from a shared African heritage where they explored diverse aspects of African history and cultures in their artwork. *Night Flight of Dread and Delight* evolved in Paris at the height of Boghossian's friendship with Wilfredo Lam, Aime Cesaire and Cheikh Anta Diop. Lam's representation of mysterious and primordial totemic images particularly inspired Boghossian's works.

A similar exploration of Lam's metaphorical engagements with disembodied figures is found in many of Boghossian's works. Parallel to Lam's, the composition and vivid imagery of this particular work is also engaged with a range of conceptual approaches to the metaphysical world. A metaphor for an alternate state of being and consciousness, this work can be characterized as radical experimentation with fragmented images of the imaginative world. The colors, lines and shapes in this work convey a certain mood and evoke a certain reality, that of the tensions of the modern age with that of the spiritual energy of Africa.

Brilliant colors are carefully mixed with earth tones, grays beiges and ochre. 56 x 62 inches, the canvas soars with two images emerging in the background, one with no hands or feet and with owl-like eyes and the other with a cat face and a long body with insect-like wings. Both are flying in the night over many dots and sparkles that resemble the stars of the sky. The owl is a central figure in African mythology. While it represents the sorcerer's bird for the Zulus of Southern Africa, it is the messenger for wizards and witches in West Africa. Other African traditions also give a variance of

reading to the owl. Fragments of other symbolic images also permeate the canvas. *Night Flight of Dread and Delight* is an original work that is intrigued by the vernacular of African intellectual thought with a brush of European modernity.

**Figure 2.5**  
***JuJu's Wedding***

Completed in 1964, around the time of *Night Flight of Dread and Delight*, *JuJu's Wedding* is a mixed media work that is engaged in mask-like visual composition. Tempera and metallic paint on cardboard, the iconography of this work again validates African conceptual schemes. The owl yet again comes in as an iconic image signifying ancestral recollection and the reconfiguration of contemporary identity. The gazing owlish eye is the focal point in this work, at once confrontational and brazen as well as evasive and circumvent. Just like in the Ethiopian church paintings, these eyes are positioned symmetrically and obliquely. They watch over the viewer and compel the viewer's gaze. While the use of the eye in *JuJu's Wedding* derives from its Coptic repertoire, it also produces its own image without a necessary frame.

The artist is illusive in the portrayal of the eye and one is forced to engage in a way Jacques Mercier described in reference to the Ethiopian talisman images of the eye: "Any gaze that engages the gaze is forced to submit to it." (Mercier, 1994, p.94) *JuJu's Wedding* interlaces and merges images and textures, which is typical in many of Boghossian's works. These are the weaving compositions that he calls "kulflfu" (interwoven) which is consistent in Ethiopian handicrafts. This interlacing of lines and textures also symbolizes the Ethiopian medicinal scrolls where the struggle of the spirits, objects and dematerialization and good between bad pervade. The artist was responding to the pressing issues of black cultural identity of his time selecting an African visual language like the owl. Boghossian intuitively retranslated forms not only to invoke his ancestral spirits, but also to assert his experience and difference.

**Figure 2.6**  
***Time Cycle III***

During a trip to Uganda, Boghossian collected bark that was used locally for burial. He worked the bark into a somber, totemic composition that derives its strength as much from the beauty of the materials' natural hues and textures as from the mysterious forms with which he endowed it. One senses a profound narrative about the grandness of Mother Nature complete with volcanoes, lava flows and mountain formations. Boghossian's fascination with the cosmos takes on a unique dimension in his bark cloth works. *Time Cycle III* is one such work where Boghossian used suitably shaped foam boards like egg containers. He places the bark on these boards and positions it in such a way for several days until the shapes of the board are firmly situated. He then hardens the mold on the bark cloth by using bonding agents.

The bark's natural earth tone is then harmonized with tints of natural oil color. The oil brings out the grain and color of the bark and enhances its natural beauty. While the warm earth tone of the work creates a sense of peace, the sharp images on the panel complicate and disturb its serenity. The different forms on the bark cloth create a sense of place without providing all the details, drawing the viewer back continually to find something new. The natural wrinkles of the cloth also give the texture of the surface its unique organic dynamism. *Time Cycle III* consists of several graphic movements, architectural compositions and emblematic symbols. As in traditional Ethiopian panel paintings, images are repeated from different points of view. Symbols resembling a lion, an African mask and a serpent loom out of the cloth with spatial relations that provoke the tension of forces. *Time Cycle III*, which is currently owned by the University of Florida Museum, is emblematic of Boghossian's experimentation with the cosmos.

### Chapter 3

#### *Figures 3.1 and 3.2 Green Abstract and Crystalline*

The shapes colors, lines and texture compositions of Desta's *Green Abstract*, *Blue Abstract* and *Crystalline* revolve around a focal shining center and a core of vibrating energy. He exploited the theme of the circle to articulate the point of departure between the perceptual and the conceptual. Heavily influenced by the works of Wassily Kandinsky, Gebre Kristos Desta used the circles as a symbol of universal truth. For Kandinsky who emphasized circles in his paintings, the circle represented the human soul where he said in the *Painter's Object* (1937) that a circle is a living wonder. When asked what the circle meant to him, Gebre Kristos Desta (Deressa, 1967, p.23) also said that "the circle is infinite, unending. It symbolizes the hemisphere and heavenly bodies. It is in line with the search for a solution in life, when it frequently happens that one may believe he has reached the optimum solution only to find (since art is life itself) that the search must continue, a perfect solution remains forever elusive."

These circles express violent motion through the profusion of sharp, jagged and entangled lines. The lines are diffused with impasto technique. The color is cool with occasional outbursts of quivering brushstrokes. The additional sparkle and texture creates opaqueness and transparency. Gebre Kristos Desta is emphatically influenced by the Expressionist preoccupation with inner feelings. The colors and forms in these paintings exercise an emotional impact over the viewer. As David Talbot ( as cited in Giorgis & Admassu, 2006, p.34) said: "The circle as leitmotif the circles are symbols of universal things, mouth, earth and sun and more importantly they also make interesting patterns."

#### *Figure 3.3*

## *Golgotha*

Gebre Kristos Desta is probably well-known for his work *Golgotha*. Oil on hardboard, *Golgotha* is a representation of Christ on the cross where the human side of the son of God painfully hangs. The lack of volume and the absence of perspectival illusion ironically enhance the image's splendor. Out of this void, the viewer can sense the turbulence of the divine body as well as the divine's serene and timeless tone. The vivid red paint and the exceptional detail leave the sacred out where the familiar image of the sacred gets disturbed. Through this complication of the divine's image, one can also imagine religious experience, in tangible terms, in an ultimate expression of Christ's humanity and humility. The crucifixion is one of the most frequently depicted subjects in Byzantine art, which the art of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church largely emanates. Byzantine art style is distinguished by three characteristics, a golden background, similarly faced characters, and patterned drapery folds. *Golgotha* obscures not only the Byzantine's artistic repertoire, but also the visual narrative of the Byzantine Crucifix which is routinely based upon the glory of Christ, his victory over death and the promise of salvation.

In *Golgotha*, the triumphant savior is bludgeoned with red paint. The color red takes an unusual power and poignancy suggesting a highly personal inspired response to the turmoil and despair of the artist's time and consequently of a people losing an awareness of the sacred. The surface is lined with black with open spaces of transparent light in the middle. These open spaces portray several crosses without the images of the divine. The transformation of light and color that looms through this part of the surface of the painting seems to explore the enigmatic relationship between the physical world and our perception of the divine.

***Figures 3.4 and 3.5***  
***In The Grotto and In the Third World***

Completed in 1979 at the height of the Red Terror, Gebre Kristos Desta's works *In the Grotto* and *In the Third World* both evoke socially critical tableaux over life. The year 1979 represented the gruesome rule of the Derg military rulers who brought mayhem and cruelty to the country and a genocidal era of trauma. Through these paintings, Desta narrated the intricate dialectics of anguish and the aftermaths of genocide. The paintings depict mummified and downtrodden images concealed of any form of identity. Made of charcoal on paper, these figures bring to mind a broader meaning of suffering. Human brutality is seen through the dark and dense application of the charcoal. *In the Grotto* portrays a skeletal looking mother and a bone like figure of a child with another bony looking child standing by her. In the distance, the viewer is confronted with another tormented figure and a skeleton lying under its feet.

The background is thick and gloomy and can be easily connected to mourning and distress, an ideal metaphor and symbol for creating understanding of the 'Red Terror' trauma. *In the Third World* exquisitely reveals a personal documentary that melded subjectivity with a public history. The image is in agony unable to get away from its shackles. The cloth that is wrapped around the figure represents a brutal ambush. Gebre Kristos Desta was narrating his deep wounds and the social mayhem that had affected his being. Unable to stand the repression of those years, he fled into exile right after the completion of these paintings and prematurely died two years later. After twenty years since the Derg was ousted from power, these images still evoke tensions in ways that have become embedded deep within the Ethiopian psyche.

## Chapter 5

### ***Figure 5.1*** ***Unit 1***

Perhaps Bezabih's *Unit I* can give a general glimpse of his earlier works, which mainly dealt with childlike figures as was unique to his distinctive style of painting. This style of primitive imagery was a big contrast to the formal work that his contemporaries were used to. Finding inspiration in children's drawings created an alternative reality and a witty and wonderful escape from everyday constraints. Bezabih's use of rich textures and colors gives these works a discrete look. Bright reds, vivid yellows and dark shadows permeate the painting. Dazzling gold and earthy browns are also added tones.

### ***Figures 5.7 and 5.8*** ***The Works of Enkokelesh and Chance and Choice***

In both *Enkokelesh* and *Chance and Choice*, Mekonnen used as baking pans called *metad* that is used for making *injera* (Ethiopian bread) and the metal plough that is used by the Ethiopian farmer. Known to have been in use in Ethiopia in its present form for the past 3,000 years, Mekonnen's ploughs are curled at their tip indicating a sense of futility. He frequently uses local materials commonly used for food production to address controversial issues. In using common day images like the iron plough and the metal pan, he explores these objects as metaphors both in form and material. In both exhibitions, one is inundated with the phallic form of the iron plough and the round shape of the pan that seem to represent gendered identities of his people, and also that simultaneously seem to represent their affinity to the earth from which the metal is smelted. He speaks of his people through the non-refined exterior, indigenous physicality and utility of the metal in its natural hues and tones, often exaggerated with the use of pigments to enhance the tones.

He welds the pans to give them their different forms and shapes. Metal fillers are used to enhance the contours of the metal. Since sophisticated materials are routinely unavailable in the country, Mekonnen is forced to use dangerous materials such as metal fillers to create the desired effect and dexterity on his sculptures. In both *Enkokelesh* and *Chance and Choice*, the artist used natural powder pigments like brown, green, ochre and black which are mixed with bonding glue on the surface of the metal. These colors give the exterior its vintage look with the cold feel of solid metal and produces a massive but yet gentle and elegant piece of work. The plough is left bare since its natural tone is already dark and roasted. Mekonnen's metal pans and ploughs reflect conscious artistic design as well as the vagaries of chance, distorting perspective and the experience of place. By bringing art to the level of the ordinary and the mundane, Mekonnen hence engages in the analogy of social transactions.

***Figures 5. 10 and 5.11***  
***Beyond***

Bezabih's recent works of acrylic and paper collage on canvas present a critical engagement with emerging forms of experience that his country is encountering. These works are striking reflections of modernity's discontents. They probe deep into the layers of modernity in a rapidly changing cultural milieu. In these works, modernity is symbolically represented in a collage of newspaper clippings that are glued to the four canvases. The newspaper is associated with a process of transition. He found these papers from demolished houses that paved way to road constructions and modern buildings. Thousands of people are relocated to makeshift houses outside the city to give way to modernity's fetishes of roads and buildings. The newspapers not only depict displacement and the construction and deconstruction of dislodged identities, but also denote nostalgic portrayals of the past.

These papers consist of photographs of past emperors and of past lives and communities. The viewer can engage in a critical appropriation of the best of the past along with its ruins. The four canvases also consist of actual birds' nests that are glued to the canvas. Traditionally, a bird's nest symbolizes intimacy, unity, a hope of life, a place in which the young are reared and a desire to go home to a warm and secure refuge. While the nest is attached to the canvas on the first work, it slowly disintegrates on the next two to completely fissure on the fourth. The artist again is articulating displacement and the traumas of dislocation. The light hues of yellow and charcoal on the canvases gives the work additional depth and intensity at the same time allowing the lower layers of the collage to show through.

### ***Desk Works in Beyond***

Colorful and unique, these works are made on old school desks that no longer serve their purpose. The artist teaches art in an all-girls school in Addis Ababa where he had easy access to these desks. The wood that has slowly weathered with time has a beautiful natural hue. It has endured the images and scribbles of young school girls that the viewer can still see and that have outstandingly harmonized with the additional coloring and toning that was added by the artist. Old newspapers that were retrieved from demolished houses are carefully pasted on the surface, which gives the surface of the wooden desks a vintage look. The artist is critically looking at knowledge symbolized by the desk that enabled the conquest and ultimately the reconstruction and transformation of identities.

Knowledge that is appropriated from the West not only has assumed power over the physical self of his country folks, but has also made them internalize the cognitive structures rooted specifically in the Western knowledge system as the universal truth. The desk represents the strength of Western skills that are profusely imitated. The

collage of newspapers pasted on the desk signifies the need to preserve cultural identities. The images in the collage depict Emperor Haile Selassie and old school notebooks that valorized the Emperor. On the one hand, the artist attempts to delineate the ways and means that the West deployed in order to reshuffle the contour of social formation and culture by going to the past, while on the other he seems to say that this conundrum took its root even in the nostalgic past that he is yearning for.