The impact of violence: the Ethiopian 'Red terror' as a social phenomenon

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1. This article intends to examine the transformation of violence in Ethiopian society as it relates to political authority and social structure. As in many non-western societies, violent interaction between social and ethnic groups in Ethiopia has shaped the contours of contemporary society, showing continuities but also significant breaks with the recent past. This development has to be interpreted chiefly in the context of processes of 'modernization' and political change since the turn of the century. The Ethiopian emperor Minilik II (r. 1889-1913) is commonly seen as the monarch who initiated irreversible political and social changes in a country hitherto dominated by a feudalist social structure around nobles and war-lords, a pre-industrial mode of production, low levels of techology and low socio-cultural inclusiveness among its various ethnic groups. It is thus with his reign that one has to start, subsequently to move on to the Haile Sellassie era and to the crucial 'revolutionary period' of the 1970 and 1980s.

Violence is characteristic of all human societies, but its expression is remarkably varied across cultures. The anthropological definition of violence used here is based on D. Riches (1991: 295): violence is seen as a contested activity to forcefully intimidate, dominate, and inflict disabling physical harm on others, with possible fatal results. The definition should also cover 'psychological violence', the state of terror in the minds of people which can be the result of the constant *threat* of violence. When the performance, i.e. the ideological and instrumental *exercise*, of violence becomes a fact of life to which people (have to) orient their daily behaviour one might speak of an emerging 'culture of violence'.

The question is whether by examining the connections between the exercise of violence and the construction of political authority in a historical perspective one can trace changes in the underlying set of social and cultural values and norms which determines the level of legitimacy and acceptability of violence in Ethiopian culture(s). All this has not been thorougly investigated in Ethiopia: e.g., there is no general, historically located and culturally sensitive study of the period of the Revolution as a socially transforming stage in Ethiopian society. Especially relevant is a consideration of the impact of the so-called *Red Terror* period of the late 1970s, which markes a decisive stage in the transformation of violence and politics in Ethiopia.[1] In addition, while much is known about the political developments of that period, a cultural and contextual interpretation of

[1] After the change of regime in Ethiopia in 1991, there has been more publicity on the Red Terror: victims could speak out and bring charges, and the government started to prepare mass-trials against officials and suspected criminals of the former Mengistu regime. But among the Ethiopian public, there is also a tendency to purposely try to 'forget' the and get on with reorganizing their lives.

the roots, performance and effects of violence as a social 'language', or as a phenomenon shaping everyday social experience, is lacking.

It will be argued here that in Ethiopia there occurred a radical break with the past under the regime of the *Derg* (the military council ruling the country after 1974 but a synonym for the regime throughout the 1974-1991 period), chiefly resulting from the extent and nature of impunity with which the new Ethiopian state-elite stimulated and condoned the use of violence against its own people. The breaking point was the period of the 'Red Terror', when the practice and performance of violence became totally dominant.[2] Contrary to the political-science view, the political or ideological rethoric of the day is largely irrelevant for an understanding of the spread of violence as a socio-political strategy itself.[3]

As stated above, a core assumption is that the process of unleashing violence was related to the problems of *modernity* in Ethiopia - to the changes in the socio-economic infrastructure, social ideologies and categories, to transformation of traditional authority and power relations, and, finally, to changing cultural notions of political legitimacy and social justice. In reaction to the challenges of modernization, new and aspiring elite-groups seized upon violence as means to promote new goals, to bridge social or regional disparities, to forge new structures of discipline and order, and to advance what they saw as development or social cohesion. This also held for the last monarch, Haile Sellassie (r. 1930-1974), who actively but rather selectively promoted modernity, neither realizing its full nature and its implications for traditional Ethiopian society in socio-political terms.

In retrospect, one might say that what makes the 'Red Terror' period one of the most crucial in modern Ethiopian history is the nature and scale of the violence and the aspect of *impunity*. It was not only promoted from above by state leaders and institutions in a defiant and often public manner without impending retribution, but it was also carried out by common local people who allied themselves with the new power-holders. Neighbours and relatives sometimes were made enemies. The regime thus generalized the use of violence in society, both transforming public perceptions of the state as a kind of legitimate reflection of the aspirations and wishes of the population, as well as undermining the social fabric itself. That this was a rather new development becomes clear against the historical background.

2. In the hierarchical society of Christian highland Ethiopia up to the reign of Haile Sellassie (1930), traditional power-holders such as the emperor, the provincial nobles and land-owners, while in power and controlling the means of violence, had a strong independent position. They were bent on violently expanding

[2] Cf. Babile Tola 1983.

[3] Details on ideological developments, factional fights, policy measures and the emergence of dictatorship in the first three or four years of the revolution can be found in Markakis & Nega 1978, Lefort 1981, Halliday and Molyneux 1981 and Dawit 1989.

their influence and wealth, and owed much of their position to the exploitation of peasant and serf labour. But they were not completely above the 'law'. There was a minimal system of checks and balances - they could not get away with arbitrary and indiscriminate violence against subordinates (peasants, craftsmen, serfs, or vanquished opponents) in their own domain. Religious leaders, especially the Christian monks, who were often scions of important leading noble families themselves, played an important part in trying to curb the violent behaviour of war-lords and to instill self-control on these 'secular' power-holders, although often with limited success. While their blessings and prayers were also sought by military leaders and kings, especially when fighting against non-Christians (Kaplan 1982: 64-65), these religious men still upheld a kind of social norm not to indulge to excesses. As such, the religious holy man was also a 'mediator' (Kaplan 1982: 70f.). Thus, it appears that built in the traditional social order was the possibility to negotiate and to make deals with those in power, in order to avoid brutal fighting as the only political option. Such an idea of balance in the Ethiopian political system in pre-modern times (though not in the form of jural constitutional limits on royal power) was effective as well during the reigns of emperors Tewodros, Yohannis IV and Minilik II (d. 1913). The idea was that whoever tried to appropriate violence and force for his own ends undermined his own legitimacy and was going to be called to account or would predictably face rebellion.[4] People could always appeal to higher authorities and demand full consideration of their grievances. There was thus a strong underlying idea in central Ethiopian culture of the ultimate supremacy of justice or law (Amharic: *Higg*), often expressed as 'the God of Law' (*BeHigg Amlak*).[5] It was an indigenous notion of fair treatment and basic 'natural' rights of the person, rooted in the values of religion and traditional rural culture[6]. It was supposedly shared by the common people. Any individual could even be called upon, e.g. on the road-side, to give his/her opinion on local matters of dispute, even if he or she came from another community.[7]

Gaitachew Bekele (1994: 6) mentions an interesting story about Emperor Minilik II, illustrating the same point: when Minilik unjustly insulted one of the men in his service, the latter - who was in a dependent position towards the Emperor - resigned, saying: "Is this the way a king is expected to use his God-given authority and power, to abuse it as an instrument to the dictates of his emotions instead of using it to administer justice? Such a king does not deserve my service. From

[4] This is reflected in one of the most famous Amharic novels from the time of the ancien régime: Haddis Alemayehu's *Eternal Love* (in Amharic *Fik'ir iske Mek'abir*, Addis Ababa 1966).

[5] Dawit (1989: 21) mentions the same traditional idea of law and right of appeal, translating it as 'officiality'.

[6] Mesfin Wolde Mariam recently emphasized its continued importance in contemporary peasant society in central Ethiopia (1991: 191).

[7] Ethiopia before the revolution was also known as a country where court litigation was developed to great heights, and practised by a very large number of people.

this moment I have resigned my position in the service of the king and I also curse my children if they should enter the service of this king." (ibid.) Emperor Minilik shortly afterwards realized that the mistake was his own, and tried to reconcile. He sent mediators to the man and offered compensation. But the latter refused, and never set foot in the palace again. What the anecdote shows is of course that in the perception and memory of many Ethiopians, the former emperors were great leaders and men of honour, not ruling by blind force but trying to respect people and to be just and fair in their administration.

3. However, the Ethiopian late 19th-century state was also a conquest state. In this respect, it must be said that in his engagement with ethnically and politically different peoples[8], who did not share a basic culture, world-view and religious identity as Orthodox Christians or who were not interlinked in trade and other economic networks, Minilik was not always as considerate. In the face of opposition or rebellion, the campaigns to subdue or incorporate them were violent and destructive. The manner of this unprovoked and excessive violence during this conquest or expansion was not in any way conducive to establish the central state's legitimacy or acceptable authority among these groups. Only over time, when economic and socio-cultural bonds between the various peoples within the Ethiopian state gradually emerged, the worst effects of the violence were mitigated and its memory faded.

This time of conquest of the areas outside the Tigriñña- or Amharic-speaking core domain of highland Abyssinia, shows that the ideas of checks and balances in the use of violence had its limits. Basically, it was applied to the own group: the highland land-holders and peasants. Spurred by the nature of the contested and institutionally weak Ethiopian state, the idea was not deemed valid in many regional political conflicts. Peaceful incorporation of independent chief- or kingdoms (e.g. Jimma Aba Jifar and Omotic-speaking southern areas) while not uncommon, was more the exception than the rule.

Important to keep in mind after the preceding section on 'traditional' Ethiopian ideas about power and violence, however, is that for political and moral authority of either a provincial lord, a regional king or an emperor to be accepted as lasting and legitimate in Ethiopia, he (sometimes she) could not derive that authority only from the sword, let alone ground it in terror and intimidation of the population at large. The norm was that a minimum of the traditional law and custom concerning authority and justice should be respected (cf. Gaitachew 1993: 194-195). In practice, violence was indeed often used to further political ends and strengthen power, but was not the central ideological basis for political authority and legitimacy.

[8] These peoples of course had their own traditions and styles of violence against outsiders/opponents. Notorious were the Islamic forces of Ahmed Grañ (drawn from Afar, Somali and Harari populations) in the 16th century for their devastating scorched earth and annihilation campaigns against the Christian populations. Until recent years, the Afar and pastoral-nomadic Oromo (Kereyu, Guji) were feared for their practice of inflicting genital mutilations on their enemies.

4. The pattern of checks and balances and of appeal expressed mainly through the religious and cultural idiom (see section 2) was modified under Emperor Haile Sellassie (r. 1930-1974), especially after his return from exile in 1941. In his modernizing drive, Haile Sellassie overhauled the entire political system of Ethiopia. He issued two constitutions (in 1931 and in 1955), introduced foreign political ideas, including, paradoxically, that of the *absolute* monarchy, which had not existed before. Another notable aspect of his reign was the centralization and gradual de-politicization of the armed forces, a result of the soldiers being turned in to a national standing army, and no longer a locally recruited fighting force led by regional lords who had political ambitions. The traditional intertwining of politics and the military was thus broken (Yohannis 1980-81: 1).

This of course did not prevent the Emperor from using the new army for crushing political and social rebellions. In Haile Sellassie's reign, one regularly saw the use of arbitrary, sometimes vehement, repressive violence against regions and peoples who rebelled (in Gojjam, Bale, Tigray, Eritrea, and against the Afar, the Somali, and the Kereyu). The monarch bypassed the traditional law of redress and appeal in these cases, enforcing his will against any forces challenging his rule. He allowed the use of various new battle tactics in subduing dissent (perhaps taken over from the Italians, who violently occupied Ethiopia from 1935 to 1941), e.g., taking innocent hostages as a means of pressure, burning and destruction of villages, scorched earth, bombing herds of livestock, burning people alive in houses or mosques, public hangings, torture of suspected political rebels and their associates. This policy of violent repression of ethno-regional dissent has to be seen in the context of the Emperor's effort to forge one nation from many, although it did certainly not necessarily follow from it. Haile Sellassie's absolutism was developed in response to challenges of modernity and national unity, but it was a cramped response. His personal autocratic rule, developed over and above the traditional ideas of checks and balances, cut off the gradual development of democratic institutions which could have involved the various sections of the Ethiopian population into the political process.

In the eyes of political elites and the wider public, Haile Sellassie also suffered from loss of legitimacy. This started with the accusation made against him by many Ethiopians that he fled his country like a coward in 1936, when the Italians were winning their war of conquest (cf. Gaitachew 1993: 41-42). About 350,000 Ethiopians had responded to his call for mobilisation to repulse the invaders, but at the critical moment he himself slipped out and left the struggle to the *arbeñ ñotch* (= patriots), the Ethiopian resistance-fighters who waged a guerilla war. According to the Ethiopian military and national code of honour, the Emperor should have stayed on, if need be to fight until his death (like emperors Tewodros (d. 1868) and Yohannis (d. 1889) did). In some cases there is, in the Ethiopian view, nothing more legitimate and admirable than the use of force for a justified cause.

The political and economic modernization process in Ethiopia - which had also led to the country's definitive entry into the world capitalist system - did not produce a strong middle-class with democratic traditions and which could bring forth leaders and institutional structures. On the one hand, there was too much dominance of foreign financial capital in the entrepreneurial domain; on the other, domestic civil society was constantly stifled by the Emperor. He was indeed the first monarch who started to 'rationalize' the administration, to choose people for government jobs on education and merit and trying to avoid ethnic nepotism, etc., but his autocratic paternalism and violent suppression of dissent undermined the modernisation process itself and blocked the advance and mobility of new social elites. Discontent with his regime, often subjacent, became widespread, as evident from the various coup attempts and local rebellions after World War II.

In the final instance, the Emperor refused to face the socio-cultural effects of his reform programmes, as well as their relation to traditional Ethiopian values and institutions, because he would then be forced to doubt his own absolutist style of governing. Factors like the continued backwardness of the rural sector (due partly to the lack of serious land-reforms), stagnating industrial development, enduring social inequalities and failure of social integration of the country's various ethno-regional communities made many Ethiopians believe that only radical solutions would work to solve the country's problems. The most vocal protest movement, that of the Ethiopian students in- and outside Ethiopia (see Balsvik 1985; Kiflu 1993) came to adopt Marxist socialism as the only possible panacea, despite the fact that this modernist ideology did not seem to fit Ethiopian realities.

Haile Sellassie's policies had also led to unease and some political consciousness in the army, partly as a response to the problems of faulty modernisation mentioned above and to the protests of the students. The army officers had no well-developed social ideology but came to think that they could use their power position to wrest change. When a deep societal crisis erupted in early 1974, they stepped in as the only organized force in the national arena.

5. In 1974, the Haile Sellassie-regime was toppled and a council of military officers took over. The public airing of their grievances which had started seriously in February 1974 was symptomatic of the state of crisis in Ethiopian society, felt by many social groups. There had been an economic upsurge in the late 1960s but in the early 1970s, the general prospects for growth and opportunities were becoming less favorable. The decisive event was perhaps the big famine in the north of the country, which drew a very belated and callous response from the government and which revealed its inadequacy to care for its own people. After February 1974, public protests and demonstrations erupted among many sections of the population - not only the students, but also teachers, taxi-drivers, workers, etc. This opened up the potential for significant political and social change. However, as we saw, there were no organized political groups or institutional structures which could step into the organisational and ideological vacuum. The one

exception was the creature of Haile Sellassie's own making: the army. The army, centralized, modernized, and well-equipped by the Emperor as a national standing army, was ultimately the only force in the country, and those who controlled the means of violence could assert themselves.

During 1974, the military 'hijacked' the revolutionary ferment and imposed their own authority. In the first months they were seen as a transitional authority, and had substantial support. The slogan of the day was: 'Let Ethiopia advance without any bloodshed'. But already after the night of 23-24 November 1974, this slogan had to be discarded: the chairman of the *Derg*, Aman Andom was gunned down (or 'committed suicide') in his home by soldiers sent by some of his colleagues (partly because of his, in the eyes of the hard-line section in the *Derg*, conciliatory and defeatist approach to the Eritrean conflict). Later that night, 59 imprisoned former officials of the previous government were also shot dead (without being accused, without trial, and in an appalling manner[9]). With these events, the road of violence was taken. This road was followed by the *Derg* government all through the various revolutionary programmes and policies of the sixteen ensuing years.

6. The real start of the Red Terror - officially so designated by the Ethiopian regime itself - virtually coincides with the violent assumption of power by Mengistu Haile Mariam, an army officer who at the time of the outbreak of the revolution in 1974 was sent to be a member of the *Derg* (provisional military council) by his Third Division, stationed in Harar. He gained dictatorial power in February 1977, and largely determined the intransigent and ruthless course of the revolution until the dismal end in May 1991. From Dawit Wolde Giorgis's account (1989), among others, it is abundantly clear that the Red Terror was largely inspired and orchestrated by Mengistu and a small group of close ideological advisors. The victims of the Red Terror-'purges' in the years 1977-78, in Addis Ababa and in the provinces throughout the country, are minimally estimated to be between 20,000 and 40,000.

In Ethiopia itself the period, while deeply engrained in the collective mind, has been suppressed. It was never discussed in public. After 1991, the new government, led by the EPRDF (= Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front, an umbrella front of three parties, but dominated by the former guerilla-movement Tigray People's Liberation Front) has allowed more open expression of thoughts and emotions on this period. There have been public hearings, accusations and calls for arrest of perpetrators. A monument for the first group of 59 victims of the *Derg* (the high officials murdered on 24 November 1974) was consecrated in 1993. Part of this attention may also be for political ends, i.e. to

[9] There was great panic and some of the victims were only half shot and slowly died of blood loss (cf. Dawit 1989: 21). This kind of execution of people who had turned themselves in *voluntarily* when called by the *Derg*, expecting to be treated according to traditional Ethiopian rules of law, was new in Ethiopian history (ibid.: 21).

define the new government's own legitimacy as a successor to the *Derg*-regime. Still, there has been reserve and reluctance 'to talk too much' about the Red Terror and its legacy.

There may thus be a problem in the interpretation of this period. While there are precedents in Ethiopian history in the indiscriminate violence, terror and looting against the population (mostly the peasantry; see Caulk 1978: 463), the Red Terror violence, due to its ideological content and unscrupulous nature, marked a new level of performance, going way beyond Haile Sellassie's practices. What was the meaning of the violence, how could it happen, why did so many people participate in it, and with such gusto, as killers and torturers? Ethiopians started asking themselves what they had become, what kind of society they had developed.

The political dimension of what happened in these years - the reasons given for the killing, party rivalries, the ideological bickering, etc. - are not interesting as elements of an explanation. The Marxist vocabulary of the day was as predictable as it was vacuous for an understanding of what happened and why. A retrospective analysis of these political debates gives a feeling of surrealist alienation to the contemporary reader, post-modern or not. The 'Red Terror' by the revolutionary government was declared 'necessary' to meet the 'White Terror' of the 'counter-revolutionary' political opposition, especially the EPRP (= Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, later also the EDU (= Ethiopian Democratic Union), and the MEISON (= All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement) and any other civilian political group. When people had been executed by the regime, it was said that a 'revolutionary procedure' had been followed, that 'revolutionary justice' had been meted out to them, or, of course, that 'class enemies had been liquidated'. The local *k'ebele* (= urban neighbourhood) committees - whose members did much of the house-searching, raiding, torture, rape and killing and which consisted mostly by people from the lower social strata[10] - were officially given the task 'to guard the Revolution, being alert at all times' (a slogan at the time). In a familiar Marxist rethorical move, the 'Revolution' became the fetish idea in which ultimate authority was uncritically vested, the abstract excuse for every kind of excess.

Some sources maintain that many excesses were perpetrated beyond the control of the central authorities, e.g., by the *k'ebele* defence squads, whose members went on their own semi-criminal killing sprees in the cities during the night (Lefort 1981: 279-280; Keller 1988: 234). Whatever the truth of this, it stands as a fact that the conditions for such activities and the emerging culture of violence in Ethiopia was outlined and stimulated by the political leadership, which did never take any legal action to curb these activities. Red Terror killers who became a liability were themselves killed by the *Derg*-leadership in the ensuing years.

[10] Lefort described them as "...la pègre des faubourgs" (1981: 277), or as: "...la canaille des bidonvilles" (279). He emphasizes the element of social revenge among these groups of marginalized misfits and outcasts rather than that of political ideals or aims.

An important aspect of this effort, and most visible in this Red Terror-period, was an elaborate *theatrics of violence*. Violence was publicly staged and performed - without hypocrisy so to speak. This in itself had a deeply intimidating effect. In a more innocous rethorical form, it was evident in a speech by Mengistu, shortly after his assumption of dictatorial power in February 1977 during a public rally on April 13, 1977. He had brought six bottles filled with blood, and in the course of his speech he crushed them on the ground: to symbolize the coming violent suppression of the 'enemies of the revolution', foreign and domestic (one bottle for every enemy, from 'imperialism' to the EPRP; Legum 1978: B213). Other elements of the theatrical enactment of violence were the elaborate rethoric of the state media and political leaders on the 'necessity' of the killings and the elimination of opponents 'to defend the Revolution'. At the peak of the violence (in the spring and summer of 1977), the Ethiopian mass media brought daily news on the killings, and television routinely showed shots of the dead and mutilated bodies of opponents (cf. Legum 1978: B212). A common practice was to leave the bodies of murdered victims lying in the streets. Some bodies of murdered young children received a placard saying "I was a counter-revolutionary" (ibid.: B233. See also Africa Watch 1991: 102f.).

In the preparations for the recent trials in Ethiopia (January-May 1995) to bring to justice former *Derg* leaders, large quantities of archival materials were found which document the killings under the previous regime. Part of them date from the Red Terror period, and include video-recordings made from torture sessions and executions. That they were kept may be another expression of the obsession of the state-sponsored killers with the autonomous power of violence, and with its subjacent sexual elements (as Graziano (1992: 153) also found in the case of the Argentine torturers of the "Dirty War" period).[11]

The challenge is to make sense of this complex of violent acts from this period. One can ask what was gained by the torture and killing of childen of 12 or of students who were seen as 'guilty' because of being young and being a student? Why strangle people with piano wire? Why expose the bodies of dead youths on the streets of the city for days, to be eaten by hyenas, and forbid their burial? How to explain the demand of the killers to the victims to first dig their own grave, and then be shot into it? Why were relatives ordered to look at the cut and bullet-wounds on the bodies of their dead sons and daughters, and prohibited, under threat of torture, to shed tears or wear black mourning clothes? How to understand the demand of soldiers to the parents of victims to pay a substantial sum of money to them for the bullets they had fired into the body of their children?

[11] All these materials have not yet been studied, however, but should yield more information on which people participated and how.

The list of inventive cruelties is long, and in many ways not unique to Ethiopia - there are many 20th-century precedents. But the dramatic aspects of this arbitrary production of corpses in Ethiopia at that time revealed one thing: the emergence of another organized and 'rational' state-terror campaign to utterly de-humanize the 'opponents' from within its own society, and a complete intimidation of the bereaved so as to make them mute, preventing them from even considering the possibility of appeal or redress. It also constituted a full negation of central cultural values of mourning, proper burial, and commemoration. The fact that people were also killed without the slightest indication of what their 'guilt' could have been was in itself part of the logic of theatrical violence: for the state to justify itself in this was superfluous, because acting in the name of the higher collective ideology of social revolution, it could not be wrong. All this amounted to an ultimate objectification of the victims, equalling them to disposable trash which was never of any value. The personal and bodily integrity of civilians was systematically violated by the state and its agents, and the threat thereof was ever-present, even in the minds of those who thought themselves to be 'on the side of the revolution'. As in all violence, there was thus a definite 'message', an imposed definition of reality in the country, a vesting of state power in the symbolism of blood and death, which pre-empted any independent role and identity of the Ethiopians, as persons or as human beings.

Apart from the public, theatrical side of the violence there was a hidden one: the torture and rape of the young opponents in the prisons. As Rejali has noted in his historical study of torture in Iran (Rejali 1994: 13), modern 20th-century torture seems to be private, not public: hidden from view. This in itself may have the effect of keeping the population in permanent suspense as to who would be the next victims and what would happen to them. In Ethiopia, the revolutionary discourse allowed the men in power to indulge in these practices of torture and rape to an extent unknown before. In Ethiopian society, the complex values of honour and shame around sexuality were a very important aspect of traditional culture and highly respected, but in the Red Terror period these values were fully reversed. Everybody knew what was going on in the prisons, but the surviving victims and their families bore the pain and the humiliation in silence.

Both the public and the private form of violence revealed the ideology of unlimited power wielded by the state and its representatives. Through violence, an almost *transcendental* grounding of 'revolutionary' authority was attempted, defining itself as beyond human and societal control, beyond checks and balances. In reality, it was of course no more than the construction of a *phantasy* of complete and unassailable power, not only of the state, but also of the group of self-appointed leaders around Mengistu.

The impact of this double-faced violence and its message was particularly grave on Ethiopian society because: of a) it being historically without precedent (although it could in part be seen as a transformation of observed Italian violence against Ethiopian civilians, and as a culmination of the violence instigated by

Haile Sellassie's army during the conflicts in Eritrea, Tigray, Gojjam, Bale, Ogaden, etc.), and b) it purposively violating central cultural values of Ethiopian society, such as the right to demand legal redress and defense under the Law, the inviolability of the person and the individual body, the respect for Ethiopian honour- and shame codes in inter-personal behaviour (which held for most ethno-cultural groups, not only the highlanders), the respect for older people and for religious dignitaries, the compassion with children, and the honouring of the dead through proper burial and mourning. Especially the fact that people were forbidden to carry out burial and mourning became a telling indication of the contempt of the regime for the population. In Ethiopian culture, cross-cutting religious and ethnic divides, the proper mourning (Amharic: *läqso*) for the dead, when relatives and friends are recovering in their homes, and when the deceased is being praised and commemorated in speeches and stories, is a core value which should never be abrogated. Denying people the right to complete the mourning period is tantamount to denying their existence, which was of course the state's purpose in prohibiting it.

For his modernisation drive, Emperor Haile Sellassie has been blamed for excessively following the 'ways of the foreigners' and neglecting or bypassing Ethiopian culture. But the same might be said, with much more reason, of the dictatorial regime of the *Derg* because of its uncritical acceptance of Marxism-Leninism as the modernist ideology for nation-building, reforms and development. This had as its concomitant a purposive lack of attention for specific Ethiopian historical and societal conditions, an imposition of economically senseless policies and ideological schemes, an arrogant treatment of native and ethnic cultures in their many forms (cf. Donham 1992, Abbink 1994), and unrestricted use of violence to enforce these policies. Incidentally, the adherence to Marxism in its dogmatic form was common in leftist circles in the West as well as in the Third World at the same time (1960s). The Ethiopian opposition, from the student movement to parties like the EPRP, shared this ideology and in 1974-75 sincerely believed it was the solution to all social and economic problems (cf. Kiflu 1993: 1). However, the *Derg*-regime made sure that there was no public debate on the merits of applying a western socialist ideology of collectivist autocratic transformation to an underdeveloped, largely agricultural society under a 'vanguard leadership' of one group (the military and its political front after 1987, the unity party).

There was also an element of *generation conflict*. The *Derg*, as a body of soldiers and officers, was also representative of a younger generation of Ethiopians, rebelling against higher authority. When the February 1974 revolt broke out, leading officers had sent relatively uneducated and rowdy lower colleagues to be members of the *Derg* in Addis Ababa (For instance, Mengistu Haile Mariam was about 35 when he was included in the *Derg*). In the beginning of the 1974 revolt, they had also imprisoned their own generals, and after having gained political power on the national level, they proceeded to detain, insult and later kill senior

figures of the Haile Sellassie-regime. In these first years, the rebellious army officers could not base their legitimacy on their maturity or age, nor on political-administrative skills. Neither were they secure about the extent of their power, nor about the policy programs to follow, and they purposively contrasted themselves with the preceding generation.[12] Gaitachew (1993: 195) is not far off the mark when he notes that people like Mengistu "...rose from the rabble", and had no constructive leadership qualities.[13]

Among the Ethiopian population at large, there still is the perception that since the days of the *Derg*, the country 'has been ruled by children', by a generation having fought its way to power but too young to have the required leadership skills and wisdom for civil democratic government. This is seen as one of the root causes of the country's misery.

7. An interpretation of this bizarre period must deal with the element of the transformative role of violence, as it was shaped and conditioned by socio-economic conditions and the cultural assumptions and values of Ethiopian society. No doubt, the wider background of the problem of violence in 20th-century Ethiopia was its very problematic and incomplete transition to modern forms of political-economic organisation. This could be seen in the lack of urban industrial development, lack of agricultural growth, negative trade balance, lack of development of a stable entrepreneurial stratum, explosive population growth, ecological deterioration, and dogmatic application of ideologies of modernisation and social change which stood in a tense relationship with traditional values and modes of behaviour. But violence *in itself*, as defined on p. 1, should also be looked at as a relatively autonomous moment of human behaviour, with an intimidating power, and once generated, it is extremely seductive for people to use in the quest for political power. As a principle of policy, as it was in the Red Terror period, it could take on a life of its own, generating its own language and semantic space.

We saw that violence has been used as an instrument of power politics all through Ethiopian history. What was new in the *Derg*-period - also compared to Haile Sellassie period - was that the military elite tried to make violence the basis of policy, authority and *raison'd'être* of the state itself. They deliberately broke with the past, to ground a new kind of legitimacy structure derived from a rethorically powerful western socialist ideology. Their need for all-embracing authority and legitimacy was deeply felt especially after the murders of November 23, 1974 (see above). The military generation which usurped power also had a pro-

[12] If one would pursue a psycho-analytic approach to the problem, one might say that the removal and killed of Haile Sellassie in August 1975 was a typical case of 'father-killing', the results of which were visited on the 'children' later.

[13] A tragic fact was that the Fascist Italian occupier had killed off virtually the whole Ethiopian intelligentsia in 1937 (educated people from various ethnic groups and regions). The absence of this first educated class of Ethiopians, which could have bridged the gap between tradition and modernity, was painfully felt in post-War Ethiopia.

found need to create an identity for itself, not being able to associate itself with the old socio-cultural order of the *ancien regime* or with the encompassing values of Ethiopian culture. Part of this effort was a campaign against organized religion: Islam and Orthodox Ethiopian Christianity. But especially against the latter, because it was so much identified with the regime of Haile Sellassie and the old leading elites of the country.[14] This attack represented another, largely unsuccessful, assault on the cultural fabric of Ethiopian society.[15]

Thus, seen in the context of Ethiopian culture and history, one transformative effect of the 'Red Terror' was that of the ultimate demise of the idea of any 'legitimacy of violence'. In this period, the Ethiopian regime came to define and manifest itself through intimidation, force, and terror. Repression and coercion became equivalent with the idea of state itself, whether it was through political detention, forced conscription for the Army, destruction of rebellious villages in the North, rape, mutilation and torture of supposed opponents, agricultural policies of villagization, collectivization and enforced low prices, forced resettlement of famine victims, etc. The 'narrative of revolution' which had opened up in 1974 never found acceptance among the Ethiopian populace after the Red Terror.

Another transformative effect was that the whole structure of Ethiopian social relations was undermined, and fear and the anticipation of arbitrary arrest and power abuse became a fact of life among the population at large. Dawit (1989: 63) sums up the atmosphere: "Every one is afraid someone is watching. All social relationships are corroded by fear." Violence created a new form of human bondage within Ethiopian society, as terror was the language of the state. Its domination over people tended to be absolute, reducing personal dignity and independence (which could still be expressed under Emperor Minilik; cf. the story on p. 4) to zero. To paraphrase James Scott (1992: 63), the assertion of human dignity was transformed into a mortal risk.

The Red Terror *generalized the performance of violence as a mode of governing*. The actual period of the Red Terror (from late 1976 to late 1978) was thus only the most intensified form of repression[16], the intimidating and theatrical expression of a violent *phantasy of power* of a regime having lost its legitimacy and public acceptance: it represented the style of governing of the whole *Derg*-period in a concentrated form, an imaginary domain of ultimate control. The practice of violence had been prepared already in the increasingly bloody wars and terror campaigns against the rebellious north (Eritrea, later also Tigray and parts of Gondar and Wollo). In the years following, the reign of fear and impunity, the

[14] A mistaken campaign, because Christianity was deeply rooted and tenaciously adhered to by a large section of the common people as well (ca. 45%. Adherents of Islam counted ca. 40-45%).

[15] The regime targeted the Church educational system, and thereby the transmission of traditional knowledge, values, musical and textual traditions.

[16] The antecedents of the Red Terror could already be seen in late 1974. Kiflu Tadesse, a former EPRP-leader, has even remarked: "The Red Terror campaign that took place between mid-1976 to 1978 was being rehearsed in the streets and homes of Eritrea as early as 1974." (Kiflu 1993: 171).

notion of the devastating power of the state, and the idea of a reversal of all values of traditional civilized life became inculcated in the minds of people. The pattern of arbitrary arrests, forced conscriptions for the army (often by kidnapping youths from markets and street corners), disappearances, torture, terror and killing went on, though less public, right until the end in 1991. The violence also continuously found new domains in which to wreak havoc: the famine crisis of 1984-85, the resettlement campaigns of 1986-87, the arrest and execution of army generals an officers who lost a battle or pleaded for policy reform, the arrests and (planned) killings of many Tigray and Eritrean people in the capital in 1990-91 in the face of impending defeat.

Seeing the Red Terror in perspective, one concludes that as part of a governmental strategy of control and of imposing societal discipline, the enactment of violence was not only a self-defeating failure, but also a perhaps contributing cause of the crumbling of the Ethiopian state and of the imagination of a common Ethiopian identity. Predictably, violence bred violence: in its external form, it led to the emergence of rebel movements which, in response to the suppresion of their grievances, were seeking redress by armed struggle. Violence was also 'internalized', through psycho-social processes of conscious suppression of fear and anger by the victims themselves, by the muting of grief, resulting in the alienation of people from the state, but also from each other. In this sense it can be said that the terror entered the collective mind of Ethiopians and affected the social fabric, creating suspicion, retreat, and a more inward orientation toward the own group: the family or the ethnic group.

This is a major legacy of a generation of violence: insecurity and scepsis about the meaning of politics, disengagement from public life, distrust of the intentions of the state, and a reluctance to talk about past losses of relatives and loved ones, habitually grown from the muting and suppression in the yers before. These behavioural responses can also be seen as survival strategies, through which people tried to rebuild their lives from within their individual, family or group context.

9. In conclusion, one must note that the so-called 'Red Terror'-period had a transformative role in Ethiopian society. Seen in a historical perspective it was characterized by an unscrupulous discarding of the remnants of any traditional idea of the supremacy of Law, and of appeal and redress. In the course of the revolutionary period, violence was a made a political aim in itself, undermining the idea of legitimacy, authority and representativeness of government in the process. This flouted any idea of *continuity* with the past and with positive aspects of Ethiopian cultural traditions. Any role for civil society and for the expression of civil sentiments was denied as well.

The intense physical and psychological violence of the Red Terror-period became rooted in society, having a lasting effect on the collective mind and on social relations among Ethiopians. Because of its violation of central socio-cultural ideals and codes in Ethiopian society - of the Christian and Islamic highlanders,

as well as of minority ethnic groups - it decisively undermined any idea of 'social contract' or 'trust' between the state and the population. The state did not respect the personal integrity of its randomly chosen victims, negated their existence as subjects with an identity or lawful rights. The people, the potential victims, reacted by disengaging, retreating, or rebelling or subverting wherever possible. The ideas of avoiding commitment, suppressing fear and grief, silently seeking help only of close relatives or remaining friends or hoping that fate would bypass them, dominated the population and penetrated the collective memory, transforming it. This breakdown of trust led to a dissociation of civilians from national policy and power structures, and to a serious weakening of overall social cohesion. Trust in this sense was increasingly vested in the private or kinship domain and in groups based on an ethnic or regional basis. The state - in the Ethiopian context a machine for resource-allocation captured by a young generation of dissociated military considering themselves free from socio-cultural constraints - came to be seen as unpredictable and dangerous, capable of turning to violence at any moment despite the so-called 'constitutional guarantees'. Through the force of state rethoric and through its imagery (e.g., its inscribing of power and humiliation in the body and mind of victims), its intimidating public discourse and its creation of arbitrary suspense, violence became a second reality for citizens.

In the introduction of this essay the term *culture of violence* was used, as referring to a system of ideas, values and representations in a society in which the instrumental and expressive role of violence predominates. Such a culture can be reinforced when groups of people 'make a living' of exercising violence, owe their position to it, ideologically perpetuate it, and institute a pattern of expected behaviour around violent acts. In other words, they may have the power to prescribe meaning and to radically thwart core values of sociality and humanity vis-à-vis others. In the period of the Revolution there was a tendency toward the emergence of a culture of violence, both in rethorical form and in actual political practice. However, it did not become universal among the population at large, as a way of life or as a normative frame of reference, because the idea of legitimacy of the state elite and its policy was never accepted, and because the population was still bound to other socio-cultural values. In the end, by persistently violating central tenets of social life and culture the state went asunder: the violence in the authoritarian-communist form of the *Derg* and the Mengistu-regime undermined its own structure and viability. As said, violence had produced more violence: the rebel movements ultimately pushed back the army, assisted by the refusal of soldiers and generals to fight a senseless cause for a disgraced regime.

The effects of the Red Terror will continue to be felt. Although it is remarkable how indigenous cultural values and norms of the Ethiopian population at large proved to be resilient and helped individuals to restructure their lives in the private sphere, most of the population will feel the effects of personal tragedy and social disruption which brought their society in a deep crisis of identity and of continuity. Neither is there yet a renewed affinity with the state or with the new

political elites. In the minds of people, the seeds of suspicion, disillusionment and anger have taken root. When Ethiopians look to the future, they see it through the red screen of the past.

However, there is no more 'theatre of violence'. Public violence is indeed shunned by the new government's armed forces - which have the explicit order to act with restraint and not to draw attention. Violence has moved off-stage: opponents and vocal critics may disappear, may be kidnapped or can be arrested and imprisoned without habeas corpus. In the countryside, many of the proclaimed democratic rights (press freedom, right to politically organize and conduct campaigns for parties, etc.) are not respected, and small-scale violent clashes - either between the EPRDF national army and the local population and rebel groups, or between members of various ethnic groups among themselves - have been a regular feature of life, with many fatal casualties. New antagonisms and political conflicts are being created, this time under the guise of an ethnic discourse, presented as a discourse of 'democratic' political rights. Campaigns of what one would call 'ethnic cleansing' in ex-Yugoslavia have occurred in various regions (Oromia, the Somali region, and Harar, as well as in Eritrea) - not necessarily under government orders, but condoned by it. Because of its conditionality and its constant reference to the recent past of the *Derg*, the present government discourse can, therefore, also be read as one of threat and of latent violence.

In general terms, the generation of indifference, detachment, and fear is the result of the continued absence of institutionalized democratic rights[17] which would enable people to get themselves heard, of the lack of a senior generation of capable rulers who show an understanding of the Ethiopian past and of the cross-cutting bonds between various sections of the population, and of the breakdown along ethnic lines of Ethiopia as an 'imagined political community'. This is not the subject of this essay, but these developments may show some of the lingering effects of the Red Terror, and may in itself again have adverse effects on the further development and social integration of a country which already had such a problematic and bloody transition to modernity.

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[17] The institutionalisation and implementation of such rights could build upon local-level traditions of democratic decision-making and reconciliation which were recognized in many local Ethiopian societies.

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