

Book Review:

Title: People of the Plow: An Agricultural History of Ethiopia, 1800-1990, 298 pages

Publisher: The University of Wisconsin Press

Author: Professor James C. McCann

Reviewer: Professor Seyoum Gelaye

I would first like to express my appreciation to the writer for spending five years of his precious time immersed in the culture, tradition, mores, and values of the small farmers located in the various regions of the Ethiopia prior to and during the writing of the book.

As a result of this concerted effort, he was able to identify the deficiencies of some previous and present non-Ethiopian writers and recognize the wisdom of small farmers in the Country. The writer has made every effort to present a sober and balanced assessment of rural life in Ethiopia.

In contrast some, so called “experts”, don’t even know that Ethiopia’s small farmers use home-made metal shear flanked on both sides by two wooden moldboards.

They liberally criticize the small farmer for not using a tractors hitched with moldboard plows, along with “improved seeds” and various chemical inputs.

They don’t even know that Ethiopians are using sustainable agricultural practices with sophisticated crop rotation systems. Also, they don’t even make diminutive effort to learn about the small farmer’s contribution to the preservation of unique plant and animal genomes or care to know that Ethiopia is the original home of coffee, teff, noog, inset, and

many other food, forage, and medicinal plants waiting to be discovered.

The writer, on the other hand, has made every effort to highlight the genetic diversity Ethiopia is famous for and has meticulously documented the strength and weakness of the agro-forestry management practices.

It is also gratifying to read about history of agricultural transformation attempted by Menelik II, Haile-Sellassie, and Mengestu. The author writes about the agricultural institutions initiated as a result of the bilateral agreement between the US and Ethiopian Governments (Point IV).

That generation of agricultural institution graduates has gone through a disjointed and in most cases irrelevant education, research, and outreach programs, more akin to the state of Oklahoma than Ethiopia. The academic philosophy and teaching materials including the professors were aliens who did not have inkling of the indigenous cultural practices or plants, animals, birds, insects, etc. As a result, students were trained about management practices of various exotic crop varieties and animals in the USA or Europe rather than about Ethiopia's natural resources.

As a consequence, most of the graduates have ended up in Europe, Canada, Australia, or North America where the education system is more in-line with their training. This situation is not any different for graduates of other higher academic institutions in Ethiopia. The education system in Ethiopia totally ignores the objective realities in the Country. It is completely disjointed and in most instances unrelated to the economic, social, and political realities in the Country.

I call those institutions as "American, British, Canadian,

German, and French” establishments of higher learning located in Ethiopia but preparing the labor force that will be mainly useful to most of the developed nations. We graduate students with a very thorough knowledge of alien history, language, social values, mores, and with no understanding of Ethiopian culture and its abundant invaluable natural resources.

The author has documented and clarified the issue of disjointedness, lack of organizational structures, absence of budgetary and policy supports, causing all the pilot projects (WADU, CADU, and SIDA etc.) initiated by various regimes in the past and that have now fizzled out with rulers that were instrumental in initiating them.

It is very unfortunate that the TPLF regime is also not learning from the recent past and presently feverishly promoting floriculture within 200 km radius of Addis Ababa and giving away 3 million hectares of virgin lowland areas to foreign capitalists while the small holder’s plot is shrinking from about half a hectare (During Mengetu’s Era) to only a quarter of a hectare. A hectare is equivalent to the size of one football field. A family of five in rural Ethiopia is expected to survive on the produce of a quarter of a hectare, which is less than 200 to 300 kg grain per annum. This is mainly due to TPLF’s ethnic based policy restricting free movement of goods and services throughout the Country, and a dramatic increase in rural population. As a result of this misplaced agricultural policy, Ethiopia is loosing most of its staple crops (Barley, Wheat, Teff, Corn, Peas, Chick Peas, Vetch, and Field Beans), and forage producing regions, that the author calls the “kitchens of Addis Ababa.” Farmers are also constrained from using age-old sustainable agricultural practices, leading into soil depletion and damage to the ecosystem.

This strategy, in my opinion, is more disastrous than the policies promulgated by Mengistu's regime. Ethiopians are condemned to suffer perpetual starvation and inhuman suffering resulting from successive misrule by undemocratic regimes. Most of TPLF's educational and so called developmental policies will eventually fizzle out like the preceding programs initiated by similar dictators before TPLF.

Since the book covers a time frame, 1800-1990, the author has left out more than 4000 years of Ethiopia's documented agricultural and other histories. Hence, the writer has unexpectedly given validation to those groups (TPLF, OLF, ONLF, EPLF and others) claiming before Menelik their ethnic groups were independent "nations."

To these groups, the "Migration of the Plow" was a result of Menelik's invasion and conquest of the southern region of the country, hence justification for TPLF's claim that Ethiopia is an anthology of "nations" and "nationalities", forcibly annexed by Menelik. As a result, TPLF's constitution states, "Every Nation, Nationality and people in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession."

Contrary to TPLF's assertion, Ethiopia is an amalgam of people resulting from free and constant movement of citizens from east to west, and north to south of the country, caused by mainly internal conflicts, foreign invasions, trade, socialization, and settlement.

Finally, it will be a great service if the writer of the book would make his hallmark and balanced historical assessment of the current "land-grab" in Ethiopia and other TPLF's agricultural policies vis-à-vis the doomed villagization project of dictator Mengistu.

I am very thankful to the author for writing this educational book. I am looking forward to reading more of his academic writings in the future.

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January 11, 2011