

THE RISE OF THE AMHARA STATE

COLIN DARCH*

R.H. Kofi Darkwah, *Shewa, Menilek and the Ethiopian Empire 1913—1889* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 233 pp.

This book deals with the expansion of the small and isolated Amhara chiefdom of Menz into the Kingdom of Shoa in the early nineteenth century, and the struggle for hegemony between Shoa and the northern provinces which was finally resolved after the death of Yohannes IV by the accession of Menilik to the imperial throne in 1889. Dr Darkwah, a Ghanaian, originally submitted the work as a doctoral dissertation under Roland Oliver at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1966; but during the nine-year interval between completion and publication, some major changes have taken place in Ethiopian historiography, and Darkwah's text has in several respects been overtaken by more recent, and indeed more scientific works.

The book is organized into three narrative chapters, which recount the story of Menz and Shoa almost exclusively in terms of traditional political history, and three descriptive chapters, which deal with the social and economic organisation of the Amhara state. As a result, the reader is left to make his own connections between the apparently static economic system and the apparently dynamic political history of Shoa. The narrative chapters divide the period into three sections: the rise of the dynasty (roughly from death of Negussie Kristos in about 1703 until the death of Sable Sellassie in 1847); the period of decline (from 1847 until Menilik's escape from captivity at Maqdala); and the reign of Menilik up until his becoming Emperor in 1889. This periodicization fails to take into account qualitative changes in the process of Amhara expansion into and domination over Oromo territory in Shoa, and later in the south generally. Until the assassination of Wassen Segged in 1813, the movement out of Menz was one of colonisation, in which the Amharas either simply exterminated local Oromo populations or, sometimes, assimilated them. The assimilated Oromo adopted Amharic names, used Amharigna, embraced Orthodox Christianity, and absorbed Amhara cultural values; their loyalty to the Shoan state was absolute and fanatical. But after 1813, during the reign of Sahle Sellasie, the process had changed to one in which the tillers of the soil were left on the land as tenant-

*Librarian, University of Dar es Salaam.

farmers under a dominant and exploitative landlord class. Assimilation, of course, continued. After the brief interruption caused by Tewodros' conquest of Shoa, Menilik gained power and continued to strengthen the Shoan state and to expand southwards, even into the 1890s after he had become Emperor.

Darkwah is correct in emphasizing the significance of firearms as the basis of Shoan military predominance. He is much less convincing when he attempts to explain the forces behind the expansionist drive. He writes of the noble aspirations of the Shoan dynasty, and attributes the attacks on the divided Oromo communities to a desire to save Amhara culture from destruction. This is inadequate. The process of expansion brought the markets and trade routes of the south under the control of the Shoan warlords, permitting them to obtain firearms from Europe in exchange for such commodities as gold, ivory, musk and coffee. In addition, since the Shoan army was largely unpaid and had to provide itself with both food and weapons, the promise of rich booty was an incentive for the peasant soldier, and a necessity for the continued stability of the regime. Darkwah, however, denies the importance of plunder as a motive force in the later expansion, and argues that individual warriors were driven to excel themselves in battle by a desire to attract the attention of the king, and thus to gain promotion.

The narrative of Menilik's reign concentrates on the king's relations with European adventurers and emissaries, and describes the imperialist rivalry between Britain, France and Italy in the Horn of Africa. Darkwah fails, however, to analyse in any depth the causes of this rivalry, or of Menilik's success in maintaining his independence. He writes, for instance, of Antonelli's conclusion of a contract for the sale of guns, which was approved by the Italian government:

... this was a stroke of luck for Antonelli since the time was favourable to him. The official Italian attitude of absolute disinterestedness [sic] in colonial matters underwent a transformation between 1879 and 1882 and thereafter became one of territorial acquisition.

No further explanation is offered.

The three chapters on government and administration, agriculture, industry and trade, and the army contain much material of interest. Darkwah describes the gradual elimination of local hereditary chieftainships, and their replacement by a hierarchy of appointed governors who owed their positions entirely to the favour of the king. By constant shuffling of these appointees, the central authority was able to ensure that none of them was able to build an independent power-base and thus to avoid a return to the baronial struggles of the *Zemene Metsafint*. This process of centralisation and simultaneous expansion of political control over non-Amhara populations provided the underlying dynamic for the creation of the Ethiopian empire.

Yet the transformation of Menz/Shoa into the centre of an empire is incomprehensible without some understanding of patterns of agriculture, land

tenure, and feudal (or according to some scholars, tributary) relations. The Amharas, who cultivated *teff*, wheat and barley, had survived the original Oromo incursions by occupying relatively inaccessible deep-cut valleys in a pattern of single farmsteads. The Oromo (referred to throughout the book as Galla), cattle-herders and horse-men, tended towards higher ground with heavier rainfall. While the ambilinear *rist* system of tenure in Menz continually subdivided inalienable land rights, the *gull* holdings in conquered areas simultaneously provided an effective mechanism for the expropriation of the rural surplus, and a means of centralising political control, since *gull* rights could not be inherited. Eventually, of course, *gull* holdings developed into a form of private property in land.

Darkwah will have virtually none of this. He states quite explicitly that "the important question of land tenure, linked as it was with the expansion of Shewa, has only been touched upon." He denies that the relationship between the aristocracy and the peasantry was feudal one, on the grounds that an administrative area was not a fief. He hardly distinguishes between the Amhara population of Menz in particular and the Oromo population of Shoa in general, referring most often to an undifferentiated "people of Shewa", and to their loyalty to the regime. He claims, surprisingly, that "the nature of Shewan society also offered, in a curious way, protection for the individual against exploitation," but it is unclear what type of individual he has in mind.

The weakest section of the book is the discussion of agriculture, industry and trade. The chapter is almost entirely descriptive, and the author does not effectively relate the data which he has painstakingly collected from primary sources either to the political structure or to the historical process. Later writers like Addis Hiwet (Ethiopia from Autocracy to Revolution, London, 1975) and Michael Stahl (Ethiopia: political contradictions in Agricultural Development, Uppsala, 1975) have offered much more convincing accounts of the relationship between economic conditions and political dynamism in nineteenth century Shoa.

Ironically for a writer who describes the Amhara expansion as an extension of the *pax Shoana* into the conquered regions, Darkwah's chapter on the army demonstrates the extent to which Amhara society was militarised, and the great importance attached to the purchase of firearms from Europe. Although he describes what was in effect a professional military class, from which administrators were often drawn and which was the main recipient of *gull* grants from the crown, Darkwah argues that Shoa society was casteless, since the centralisation of political power prevented the inheritance of wealth and hence of influence. He similarly minimizes the role of the Church, maintaining that it played no direct part in the political life of the kingdom. Yet the theological disputes between the Tewahdo and Kibat sects during Tewodros' reign, to which he devotes several paragraphs, can be shown to have been part of a fierce struggle between religious and secular

authorities for hegemony. It is, after all, unlikely that the Church as landowner would have had no political role to play.

Dr Darkwah has made extensive use of government and missionary archives in London, Paris and Rome, and of the printed travel literature. He has not used Ethiopian-language sources, except for translations of the Royal Chronicles, and his bibliography of secondary literature is sparse, omitting several items of importance that have appeared since 1966. The book lacks an adequate theoretical framework, and fails to make any serious attempt to relate the economic base of Shoan state formation to the dynamics of expansion into southern markets and trade-routes, or to the European scramble for Africa, which was taking place during the later period. According to his publisher, Darkwah attempts to show how Shoan trading and military power ensured the survival of Ethiopian independence. But although he succeeds in presenting a detailed narrative history of the Menz dynasty and the Shoan kingdom, the author fails to locate the events he describes concretely in the context of the social and economic relations of Amhara society, and so has described but not explained the rise of Shoa and the establishment of Amhara dominance.