Censorship of Historical Thought

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Archeology appeared to be a particularly vulnerable field in Ethiopia.

1957 According to a former official of the Press and Information Department of the Imperial Government of Haile Selassie, the following were among eleven subjects “best left untouched” in March 1957: “Cold War polemics” and “the United States, France, United Kingdom and Portugal in colonial contexts”.

1972 In March Patrick Gilkes, a British history professor conducting private research in Ethiopia, and Moira Larson, an American sociology lecturer at Addis Ababa University, were detained on suspicion of involvement in local student activities and expelled ten days later.

1974 Before the overthrow of Haile Selassie, many theater plays taking a critical look at Ethiopian imperial history, often obliquely, were censored.

1975 In early 1975, a few months after Major Mengistu Haile-Mariam's military had abolished the monarchy in September 1974, an old film, Prince Valiant, depicting the ascent to power of a crown prince after his throne had been usurped, was televised. The censoring officer, a captain, was reportedly heavily punished. Around the same time, it was instructed that the terms feudalism and imperialism were banned until further notice.

1976–81 Within two weeks of his return from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, where he finished a Ph.D., to Ethiopia in 1976 to take up a lectureship in the Addis Ababa University history department, Bahru Zewde (1947–) was arrested for his alleged membership of the clandestine Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party and imprisoned until 1981. Later he became a professor in modern history at that university and chairman of its history department (1982–86). He is the author of A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855 to 1974 (Addis Ababa 1991; updated until 1991 in 2001), the second edition of which could only be published after Mengistu’s fall, and a specialist in the causes for the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict.

1978–87 In August 1978, Ethiopian Security expelled American archeologist and geologist Jon Kalb, who had resided and worked in the country since 1971, because of unsubstantiated rumors that he was associated with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and received covert funds from it. The rumors were a major factor for the National Science Foundation (NSF) to decline funding for three Ethiopian excavation and research projects initiated by him and submitted in late 1976. After he requested documents from the NSF under the Freedom of Information Act in 1978–80, Kalb interviewed some peer review panelists in his case. Some NSF documents were destroyed or missing. In April 1986 he testified to a congressional task force. Later that year, he sued the NSF and in December 1987, won an out-of-court settlement from the NSF. The NSF admitted to abuses in the case (including peer review panels in which some of Kalb’s colleagues with conflicting research interests participated and advised against his proposals; censored peer review records; refusal to give Kalb the opportunity to rebut the CIA rumors; ignorance of four separate reconsideration requests by Kalb; and, finally, maintenance of a secret and illegal filing system in existence between 1975 and 1990 to circumvent the Privacy Act), publicly apologized to Kalb, and paid him 20,000 US dollars to cover his legal costs. According to Kalb, the CIA allegations also harmed several of the Ethiopian colleagues and students who collaborated with him. In 1987, Kalb was an unpaid research assistant at the Texas Memorial Museum in Austin.

1982– In mid-September the government of Ethiopia brought to a halt all foreign prehistorical expeditions. The archeological teams of Desmond Clark and Tim White, and of Donald Johanson, both teams from the University of California, Berkeley, were the first to be hit by the moratorium. Before the end of the year teams from Japan, France, and Italy had also been refused entry. Reasons suggested for the ban included that foreign teams had exploited Ethiopian resources while giving little attention to training local scholars or to developing local facilities. In addition the book Lucy: The Beginnings of Humankind (New York 1981), by Johanson and Maitland Edes, had angered Ethiopians because the authors had described how they had removed a leg bone from a recent Ethiopian burial ground for comparison with a fossil knee joint some three million years old. This act was considered to be a desecration of the grave. The ban remained in force until at least 1986.

1988– The government suspended archeological field research near Kassala, presumably because of constant military action in the region.
1993—In June Fesseha Zewde, a professor at the Addis Ababa University history department, was dismissed, apparently because, inter alia, he was one of 41 professors who had demanded for an inquiry into the violent government response to January student protests against a planned referendum on Eritrean independence.

1997—In October two writers were arrested, allegedly for their activities as journalists for the Oromo newspaper Urji and their membership in the Ethiopian Human Rights League. They were held in solitary confinement for five months and denied any visits from their family. Thereafter they were charged with armed conspiracy and involvement with the Oromo Liberation Front. Gamachu Malka Fufa (pen name: Moti Biyya (?1957–) was a journalist and social anthropologist interested in the Oromo identity and through his books he provided Oromo society with a historical background. He had published Oromia, the Hidden Atrocities (1995), a political analysis of the colonization of the Oromo people by successive Abyssinian groups, and Abyssinocracy or Democracy? (1997), in which he compared the situation of the Oromo minority under the Mengistu government (1974–91) and its successor. Garuma Bekele (?1960–), executive secretary of the Human Rights League, was a journalist who had published, inter alia, a historical novel, One Day in Afaan Oromo, on the problems Oromo had in East Africa from the 1950s to 1989. In July 1999 he was charged with violating the press law and with engaging in “terrorist activities”. In April 2000 Gamachu was unexpectedly released on bail and went into exile in Canada. In May 2001 Garuma was also released; he went into exile in Kenya.

2000–01 On 22 December up to two hundred Oromo students from Addis Ababa University were beaten by police when they were arrested after a fight between Oromo and other students, which started after a Tigrayan student had presented a sociology class paper about the Oromo, in which he used the word “galla”—a derogatory term for “Oromo”—when quoting a historical book. Among the arrested was fourth-year history student Badada Bayene. Up to 150 students, including Badada, were taken into police custody and were reportedly at risk of torture. Later they were released.

Sources
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