

Mekuria Bulcha

Flight and Integration. Causes of Mass Exodus from Ethiopia and Problems of Integration in the Sudan

Uppsala: Mekuria Bulcha and Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1988, 256 pp, 7 maps, 66 tables, 3 figures, SEK 150,-

Every time a country faces a formidable crisis, books of all sorts mushroom at an astounding speed so that it becomes difficult for the reader to cope with. This has been the case at least with Ethiopia in the years 1867-69, 1894-97, 1934-43 and since 1974. While publications are always welcome as records of events and opinions, it is sad to note that the bulk of this spontaneous production is none the less superficial in approach, plagiaristic in essence, and transient in character. Very few of them deserve the description of being the fruit of genuine research or primary observation.

The work under consideration differs (despite its intermittent relapses) from the bulk of the literature in at least two respects: it is the result of a researchwork undertaken in the early years of the present decade on one of the most complex problems of Northeast Africa which has hitherto been treated only partially, as the author himself remarks: "Most researchers dealing with involuntary migration are primarily concerned with the flight and the situations or problems which consequently arise in the host society." (Cf p. 78 f.). The subject has, therefore, received a tridimensional consideration - problems of the country of origin (i.e. Ethiopia), difficulties encountered by the victims (i.e. the refugees) and the inconveniences that have befallen the host country (i.e. the Sudan) which accommodates for about half a million displaced, destitute people from her eastern neighbour. The work is also an account authored by an insider, and as such it reflects the author's firsthand knowledge of the subject, his inevitable sympathy with the victims to whom the book is dedicated, and his political commitments to the cause of at least a part of the suffering multitude.

Millions of people have been displaced in Ethiopia in the last two decades, though only a fraction of their number has left the country and still less is recognized (cf p. 80) by the international legal system as refugees. The reasons for this massive displacement are manifold. The researcher mentions a host of factors pertaining to inherent socio-cultural conflicts, political aberrations and natural disasters - all of which converged in recent times to accentuate the miseries of the country.

The fugitives are categorized (cf pp. 78-84 and 127-29) according to the domineering factors: most conspicuous but very small in size has been the group of political activists who aimed at a radical change in Ethiopia. Its members were primarily the educated, quite a few of whom perished in the struggle. Another group is referred to as the contenders for power and consists of those who led abortive coups. Then, the opponents of change consisting of people who had enjoyed particular privileges under the previous regime. Those persecuted for racial or religious reasons form a viable category; and finally, the group of the masses displaced by arbitrary policies (e.g. villagization and resettlement projects) and

incessant wars and who, in the words of the author, are "... carried along by the stream" (p. 129). The so-called economic refugees frequently alleged by conservative politicians in industrial countries to have consisted 90 % of asylum-seekers hardly constitute a noticeable group of its own in this study, although about 20 % of the interviewees in the field have given poverty as a reason for their flight. Their pauperism is attributed to war, forced conscription and unjust taxation and, hence, political in essence. The journey to the next safe territory is too hazardous to justify any motive of the kind, and needless to say that the knowledge of the majority of the fugitives about the outside world to which they were heading was poor to say the least. The primary intention of the interviewees, as the results show, was the search for safety.

The objectives of this sociological study are outlined (cf p. 16) as being four: "... to identify the root causes of the refugee-producing conflicts in Ethiopia", "... to describe the ramifications of the current refugee-producing problems in Ethiopia", "A brief examination of the process of transition from a citizen to refugee ..." and "... to explore the problems which respondents encounter in the process of their integration into Sudanese society". The research has been a success in all but the first one, the account of the process of displacement in particular being superb. The descriptions are vivid, the language fluent, and the problems real, so that the reader cannot help sympathizing with the victims. Apart from his personal experience in the country itself, the author researched extensively among the refugees in the Sudan and drew much material from published works. With the financial assistance of the Swedish Agency for Research Co-operation with Developing Countries (SAREC) and under the auspices of professor Ulf Himmelstrand of Uppsala University, Mekuria Bulcha did the research in eight refugee centres located in southern Sudan. 443 "households" were sampled out for observation and completing questionnaires. The data are analyzed and processed into various tables, figures and maps. None the less, some questions remain outstanding. On what basis were the eight sites selected? One can scarcely be satisfied with the half-hearted explanation given in note 3 of p. 94. Why are the refugee sites in eastern Sudan (Khassala, Khartoum, Port Sudan) which, according to the author's admission, sustain the highest concentration of refugees (cf p. 93) excluded from the study even if they were examined partially by a colleague, as claimed?

The major weakness of the work is, however, its failure to put the complex problems into their historical context. In an attempt to identify "the root causes", the author devoted two chapters (2 and 3) to the historical background without which the book would have been better off. Apparently, his approach to the sources was far from being critical. The substance is evidently a rehash of some politically motivated sensational works, and the factual distortions are copied therewith without reservation. We cannot help being perplexed when the book commences, for example, with such a statement as, "The furthest logical distance we could go in historical time to locate the roots of the refugee - producing conflicts is the period of the formation of Ethiopia as an empire at the turn of the century" (p. 16). Are we to understand that the Ethiopian state was not an empire prior to "... the turn of the century" or that it was judicious until the end of the last century? Ethiopian historical

records are full of evidences to populous displacements, massive resettlements, and political and religious persecutions at least in the last 1500 years. One needs only to read the chronicles and the epigraphic records, but precisely these very sources are ignored in this work. These two chapters are also full of factual and chronological errors which cannot, however, be reproduced here. Suffice it to advise the reader to skip the above-mentioned chapters and enjoy the rest.

Some aspects of the historical interpretation forwarded or imitated by the author are also questionable. For instance, he attributes the factional conflicts of the revolutionaries in the 1970's - which took a heavy toll on the urban youth - not to "... fundamental differences between the combatants", but to "... the traditional Abyssinian dislike of compromise" (p. 66). It is astonishing that someone who originated from the same, or similar (as he distances himself through the use of the dubious name "Abyssinia"), society should make such a blunder! Ironically enough, Hagai Erlich, whom Mekuria Bulcha repeatedly cites elsewhere in the book, is one of the exponents of the culture of compromise in Ethiopia! Compromise was one of the salient components of Ethiopian customary legal practice. People looked with consternation upon a litigant who went to court against the will of village elders. Primarily murder cases and some serious communal or institutional matters were traditionally referred to the rulers. This tradition was suppressed in favour of centralized bureaucratic judiciary, and attempts on the part of the Provisional Military Administration Council and the liberation fronts to revive it brought about the *qäbälé* (local committees) and the *shimagilé* (communal elders). The author seems to have confused the tradition with the bureaucratic judiciary imposed upon the society in recent decades in the name of modernization. Even then, it was the corruption and inefficiency of the judges (or to be exact, the whole political mechanism) and not the lack of compromise that delayed or misconstrued verdicts.

In spite of these shortcomings, the book is worth reading, and Mekuria Bulcha is to be commended for his tangible contribution.

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"Das Recht" in Südostasien zu beschreiben und zu analysieren, dürfte wohl eine der schwierigsten, aber auch reizvollsten Herausforderungen sein, denen man sich in der