

Religion and the Marxist State in Ethiopia: the Case of the Ethiopian Jews*

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Towards the end of 1974 a group of previously unknown sergeants and majors led Ethiopia into a revolution which transformed the state from a semi-feudal monarchy into a Marxist-military regime.¹ The revolution which they sought to promote was far-reaching and affected all aspects of life, including religion. With the new regime clothed in a Marxist mantle, it seemed reasonable to expect the implementation of extreme measures against religion in general and separate religious groups in particular. In addition, many reports by tourists, observers and some researchers during the first revolutionary years confirmed that steps were indeed being taken against certain groups — the Jews amongst them — as part of a campaign against religion.²

This article is concerned with the state's policy towards religion and religious groups after the revolution of 1974. It re-examines the issue of religious repression in Marxist Ethiopia and analyses changes within the Ethiopian Jewish community since the revolution. As a result it should be possible to gain a better understanding of the relationship between ideological rhetoric and policy making, and between policy making and policy implementation in this area.

The study focuses primarily on changes which occurred within the Jewish community between the years 1974-83, and distinguishes between changes due to the revolution itself and those arising from other circumstances — in particular, the renewal of the civil war in the northern provinces of Ethiopia and the increased emigration of

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¹We will not discuss the revolution itself in any depth here. For an excellent exposition see M. Ottoway: *Ethiopia — Empire in Revolution* (New York, 1978).

²See, for example, *African Research Bulletin — Political Social and Cultural Series*, Vol. 13 No. 2 (1976), p. 3,931; *Africa Contemporary Record*, Vol. 9, (1976-77), p. 205.

Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Information on the regime's general policy towards religion has been drawn mainly from Ethiopian publications (general and ecclesiastical), newsletters of international organisations and interviews with Ethiopians both in Ethiopia and abroad. Data on the changes that occurred within the Jewish community itself derive primarily from interviews conducted with Ethiopian Jews in Israel.³ Additional material was collected in Ethiopia between 1981-84, in visits to Jewish villages and from conversations with local Jews. These data were used to confirm or challenge information collected in previous interviews, to raise additional questions and generally to complete the picture painted by Israeli-based informants. The conclusions presented below are part of an ongoing research project. At this stage, as a result of research difficulties arising from the vast size of the 'Jewish area', as well as from topographical and transportation problems, it is not possible to reach final conclusions which would be valid for all 469 Jewish villages existing in Ethiopia prior to the mass emigration to Israel in 1984. We offer here only preliminary conclusions based on insight into major directions of change in a limited number of villages.

The Regime's Policy Towards Religion

Soon after the revolution the new regime, the *Derg*,⁴ published two major statements in which it set forth its policy towards the economy, society, religion, administration and other aspects of national life. The first, *Ethiopia Tikdem* ('Ethiopia First') was announced on 20 December 1974. In this document the equality of all individual Ethiopians, regardless of sex or religion, was decreed. In addition, religious freedom was explicitly guaranteed.⁵ In April 1976, after a period of ideological consolidation, a second major statement was

³ Most of the informants were or are from one of the following villages: Ambovar — a relatively large rural village of 3,500 inhabitants in 1976; Atege — a small rural village of 140 inhabitants in the 1980s; Aba Antoniuos — a small rural village of about 180 inhabitants, close to the large city of Gondar; Shawada — a small rural hamlet of about 80 people in the Simian mountains. For more details on these villages see *Joint*, unpublished research on Jewish villages in Ethiopia between 1974-76, 1976-80. The document contains details of the number of Jews in each village, age and sex division, occupation and income. In addition a number of Ethiopian Jews from other areas were interviewed for comparative purposes and in order to complete our information.

⁴ *Derg* in Amharic means committee or central-committee. The *Derg* was established in 1974. Initially it had 120 members, representing different army units. During the first years of the revolution, the number of its members was drastically cut. See Pliny, the Middle Aged *sic*, 'The Lives and Times of The Derg' *North East African Studies*, Vol. 5 (1984-85).

⁵ A full English language version of the 'Ethiopia Tikdem' can be found in Ottoway, *op. cit.*, p. 214.



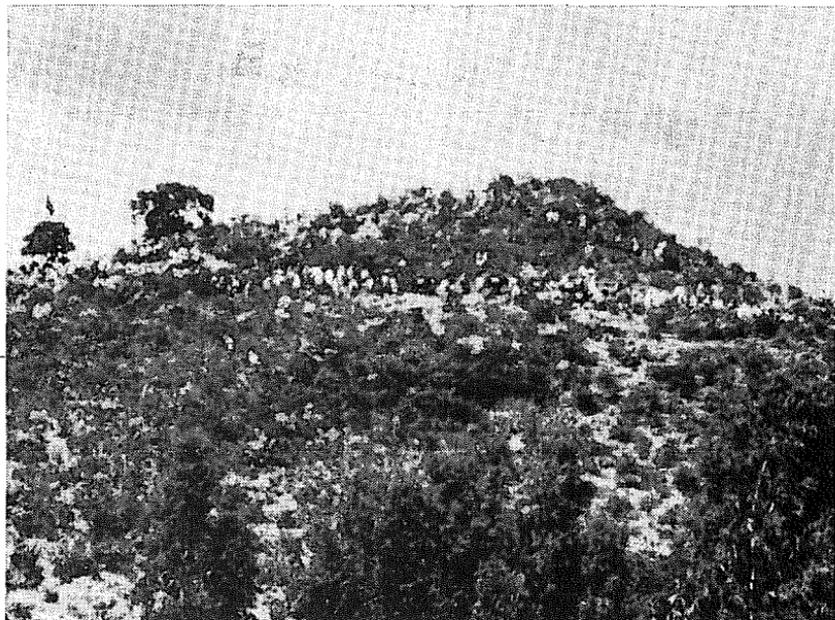
Khases (rabbis) in the synagogue at Ambovar.

Ethiopian Jews

See article on pp. 247-56.

(Photos courtesy Galia Sabar Friedman)

Ambovar, 1986: pilgrims climb the mountain to pray as part of the *Sigd* celebrations.





Rev. Jan Dus
(Photo © IGMF)



Rev. Jakub Trojan
(Photo © Keston College)

Leading Figures in the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren

See article on pp. 230-46.



Rev. Jan Simsa
(Photo © Keston College)



Philosopher Ladislav Hejdanek
(Photo © Keston College)

published by the *Derg*: the 'Programme of the National Democratic Revolution of Ethiopia' (NDR). This important document made few references to religion or national and religious minorities. It nevertheless stated that:

. . . The right of every nationality to self-determination will be recognised and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism [. . .] There will not be any sort of discrimination among religions. No citizen will be accorded special political, economic and social privilege on the basis of religion[. . .]⁶

A close examination of these sections, as well as those concerning religion in other declarations,⁷ shows that the *Derg* emphasised the complete separation of state and religion. This separation was fully expressed in the equal status given to Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and African religions, as well as in the abandonment of Ethiopia's traditional Christian image. Prior to the revolution of 1974, the concepts of the Ethiopian state and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had been almost synonymous — both locally and internationally. This, despite the fact that almost 50 per cent of the population of Ethiopia consisted of Muslims, members of various Christian groups, Jews and others. To the extent that they harboured no political aspirations and were unobtrusive, these groups had been permitted to observe their religious practices. Within the new socialist society, equality — group as well as individual — was axiomatic.⁸ This tolerance of religious differences, however, was not synonymous — on the ideological and rhetorical levels at least — with tolerance of religion *per se*. The new regime defined itself as 'Marxist' and, with this self-image, declared religion to be the 'opium of the people'.⁹ Yet although the *Derg* might have been expected to pursue a policy of religious repression, it based its actual policies on practical political considerations. Whilst in its rhetoric the *Derg* portrayed religion as an anti-national element, in practice it took no steps against individual believers. This tolerance did not, however, characterise its policies towards religious institutions which, though generally not directly attacked, had their power indirectly undermined.

⁶A full English language version of 'The Programme of The National Democratic Revolution of Ethiopia' (NDR) can be found in: *Basic Documents Of The Revolution*, (Addis Ababa, 1977) p. 14.

⁷See for example the 1979 'Declaration of the Ethiopian Revolutionary Information Centers' (ERIC) (ERIC Official Publications: Addis Ababa, 1979).

⁸'Ethopia Tikdem' Section No. III, 'NDR' Section II No. 6.

⁹For a full version in English see *Ethiopian Herald-Daily News*, 29 April 1975.

One of the main aspects of the *Derg's* policy in both the above declarations (in different versions) was the call for the nationalisation of all rural lands.¹⁰ This included all church land and property, as well as schools and other religious institutions. The church's right to tax land was also cancelled. Whilst these steps greatly reduced the church's economic and political power, they did not diminish its support amongst believers.

In pre-revolutionary Ethiopia, ethnic identity and affiliation to a particular religion overlapped to a considerable degree. Moreover, in many instances, religious activity had distinct political-ethnic overtones. The *Derg* feared that unrestrained religious activity might strengthen ethnic differences and that religious institutions could be used to apply political leverage to the central government. Especially in the peripheral regions, this could take the extreme form of demands for self-determination or autonomy.

As we shall attempt to show, these fears were the basis of most of the steps taken by the *Derg* against religious groups. Elsewhere I have discussed the regime's relationship to the Catholicism of the Oromo and the Makeno-Yesus Church, as examples of this policy.¹¹ Here I consider the case of the Ethiopian Jews.

The Derg, Religion and the Ethiopian Jews

During the period 1974-84 numerous sources claimed that the Ethiopian Jews were victims of an anti-Semitic policy pursued by the government.¹² This interpretation is inaccurate, because in fact most of the steps taken against Ethiopian Jews were a response to opposition political movements in areas inhabited by Jews. And in some instances Jews themselves took part in such activities. To be sure, some steps were indeed taken against specifically Jewish institutions, such as schools where lessons in Hebrew and Judaism were made illegal. It seems that these steps were prompted by a conception of the incompatibility of particularistic religious affiliations and an Ethiopian national identity, a perception strengthened, in this

¹⁰For a full version of the declaration on nationalisation of all rural and urban land, see Proclamation No. 47 of 1975 in *Basic Documents, 1977*. For a thorough examination of the impact of nationalisation of all rural and urban land, see J. Cohen and P. Koehn, 'Rural and Urban Land Reform in Ethiopia' in *African Law Studies* Vol. XIV No. 1 (1977), pp. 3-62.

¹¹The Ethiopian Orthodox Church's economic and political power was diminished by the *Derg*, but their exclusively *religious* activities (ceremonies etc.) were usually not disrupted. For a discussion on the new position of the church, see one church leader's statement in *Africana Research Bulletin* Vol. 11 (1974), p. 1,002.

¹²See for example *Haaretz*, 3 January 1979, p. 4; *Maariv*, 6 November 1981 and 21 February 1979 p. 12.

case, by the desire of the majority of Ethiopian Jews to emigrate to Israel. Thus the Judaism of *Beta Israel*¹³ was part of their separate national identity (as was the Catholicism of the Oromo and others). The *Derg* fought against expressions of separate nationalisms as part of its endeavour to create a unitary Ethiopian national identification. Hence it viewed Ethiopian Jews and other religious-national groups as anti-revolutionary, separatist and centrifugal elements. In short, the *Derg's* policy with regard to religion in general, and Judaism in particular, was directed against religious institutions. The persecution of Jews that did take place was limited and irregular, and was primarily in response to a particular individual's participation in illegal activities.¹⁴ It was not characteristic of the regime's general attitude or policy towards the Jews as such.

As part of its revolutionary reorganisation of society, the *Derg* instituted many reforms in the religious sphere. An important new phenomenon was the addition of an avowedly political dimension to religious ceremonies. Some of these were used by the government as a forum for the dissemination of political propaganda. A good example of this was the 1984 *Sigd* celebrations in Ambovar.¹⁵ At the end of this important holy day, a representative of the local government made a political speech, which included warnings to those Jews who were planning to escape to Israel.¹⁶ Attendance at the event was compulsory. Some Ethiopian Jews in Ambovar reported that this kind of government interference had been common for some years.¹⁷ Moreover, informants also reported that some synagogues had been burned or otherwise desecrated and that, in some instances, local Christian farmers were encouraged to harm Jews, though by whom and on what authority is still unclear.¹⁸

Yet despite this it is worth noting that the percentage of Christians attending Jewish holy day ceremonies and festivals has increased in the past few years. We cannot fully explain this fact, but from interviews with Ethiopian Jews, we gain the impression that the purely religious importance of the ceremonies has declined and that they have taken on extended social, economic and cultural functions as well.¹⁹

¹³ The Ethiopian Jews, otherwise known as *Falashas*.

¹⁴ Details about the involvement of Ethiopian Jews in underground activities were given in 1984 by Avraham Sahalu from Beer-Sheva.

¹⁵ A unique pilgrimage festival practiced only by Ethiopian Jews. For a discussion see Ben-Dor 'The *Sigd* of *Beta-Israel*', in *Ethiopian Jews and Israel*, edited by M. Ashkenázi and A. Weingrod (New Brunswick, 1987) pp. 140-59.

¹⁶ Observed first-hand by the author.

¹⁷ Asafa Farade, Tel Aviv, June 1984; Bugale Yona, Petah-Tikva, January 1984.

¹⁸ Information from Ambovar in April 1983 and September 1984.

¹⁹ As noted by the author in comparing the attendance of Christians at the holy-day festival in three consecutive years; confirmed by Avraham Sahalu, Beer-Sheva, February 1984 and G.R., Jerusalem, January 1985.

The scope of these ceremonies had begun to increase long before the 1974 revolution and, hence, the revolution simply intensified processes which were already underway.²⁰

The revolutionary regime imposed restrictions on the mobility of the Ethiopian population. This also affected the Jewish community. Mass attendance at Jewish ceremonies and festivals — like the *Sigd* — has diminished, and a number of local religious centres, each serving a small number of villages, have developed alongside the previously few central ones. Communal assembly in many local centres has created difficulties in communication between the various Jewish communities in different areas. Thus information that was easily transferred in the past now moves at a slower pace or is not communicated at all.²¹

The difficulties imposed by geography, transportation and communication appear to have influenced a change in the hierarchical system of the *kases* (rabbis)²² and the status and importance of local *kases* have increased at the expense of the regional *kases*.²³

Changes within the Jewish Community

Changes other than those already discussed have occurred within the Jewish community. Prior to the days of Haile Selassie, as well as during his reign, Jews were not permitted to own land freely. Usually they were tenants, paying taxes to their landlords, and some were hired labourers with no special rights.²⁴ In the immediate wake of the revolution, some landlords took advantage of the unclear legal status of their tenants, and evicted Jews from their land.²⁵ Many were left with no land, no work and nowhere to go. This situation, however, lasted only for a short period. The restriction on Jewish ownership of land in Ethiopia was cancelled soon after the *Derg* came to power in 1974. In addition, some Jews received grants of land from the government. Yet this policy was successfully implemented only in those areas in which the regime was able to impose its land policies on the local population. Amongst those we interviewed, the Jews who had been given land felt that this was the most significant change in

²⁰ Concrete examples of the decrease in the purely religious content of Jewish ceremonies can be found in W. Leslau, *Falasha Anthology* (New Haven, 1951).

²¹ Asafa Farade, Tel Aviv, June 1984; Bugale Yona, Petah-Tikva, January 1984.

²² The religious authority (rabbi) of the Ethiopian Jews.

²³ As reported by Rahamim Berhanu, Tel-Aviv, 1984; Elias Mathiew, and Netzer-Sireni Jerusalem, October 1981, April 1983, September 1984.

²⁴ This was specifically implied by Emperor Tzhak 1413-30, and had been Imperial policy at least since that time. For an excellent discussion on the land laws and tenants system prior to the revolution see J. Cohen, and P. Weintraub, *Land and Peasant In Imperial Ethiopia, The Social Background to the Revolution* (Netherlands, 1975).

²⁵ As was the case with other, non-Jewish, villages all over the country.

the life of the Jewish community,²⁶ but when questioned further about concrete changes most were unable to cite subsequent improvements in their economic situation.

Interviews with Jews from rural areas reinforced the impression that no real improvement had occurred in their economic position as a result of the land reforms. This may be explained, in part, by the fact that since 1978, rumours about the possibility of emigration to Israel were widespread and many young people left the land. By 1987 more than half of the Jewish community had left Ethiopia. As the vast majority of these were people of working age, the result was a decline in the communal income. From 1978-83, many families did not prepare their plots for seeding in the belief that they would soon be leaving for Israel.²⁷ For those who were thereafter unable to emigrate, this lack of preparation caused tremendous economic difficulties, and it was reported that, in some cases, people almost starved. Incomes were diminished still further by land taxes imposed on landowners in 1975 which, although not high, were a burden on the small family budget. Other factors diminished the ability of Ethiopian Jews to cultivate their land, amongst them the fact that some volunteered for the army and might be sent on military missions far from their homes, whilst many more joined the underground forces in the northern provinces (Tigre, Eritrea, etc.).

The revolutionary regime brought about further structural changes in the rural areas through the organisation of farmer and peasant associations and the formation of local militias. It was reported that many Jewish villages joined these new organisations — some voluntarily, others under coercion.²⁸ According to our informants, most Jews objected to these organisations since they were considered to be a threat to traditional structures and means of control. The farmers' or peasants' associations and the militia produced many changes in the lives of Ethiopian Jews: from the introduction of modern agricultural tools and methods to bringing Jews into close contact with Christians, contact which had formerly been forbidden by the traditional Jewish laws of social purity. Another productive segment of the Jewish community to be affected by the revolution and by emigration from Ethiopia were the traditional craftsmen: blacksmiths, weavers and potters. These craftsmen now had to compete with cheaper imported products that flooded the markets of Ethiopia — coming either as part of foreign aid or as the result of barter deals by the government. Moreover the revolutionary

²⁶As reported by informants in Ambovar in April 1983 and September 1984 and in Jerusalem in January 1985.

²⁷Mathiew Elias, Jerusalem, September 1984.

²⁸This was observed by the author, especially in the areas between the villages of Tada and Azazo and between Tada and Ambovar, all in the Gondar region.

government pursued a policy of compulsory diffusion of traditionally Jewish craft skills as a result of its fear that emigration to Israel would lead to a shortage of blacksmiths and potters. Few of our informants reported a decrease in income for craftsmen, but they did mention that many craftsmen were retrained professionally.²⁹

The revolution introduced other changes which affected the Jewish community. Prior to the revolution, the illiteracy rate in Ethiopia was amongst the highest in the world.³⁰ The school system was small and functioned mainly in the big cities. The literacy campaign (*Zamache*) instituted by the *Derg* led to the unprecedented exposure of Jewish villages to secular education. The only prior Jewish experience of education had been in the Jewish Agency's schools that started in the 1950s and the *Ort* system of schools that started in the 1970s.³¹

Both had schools and professional training courses all over the Jewish areas. The *Ort* schools stopped functioning as Jewish schools at the beginning of the 1980s. Their buildings were used as government schools and their Jewish teachers were dispersed amongst other schools. Unlike the *Ort* voluntary system, the *Zamache* was compulsory. In addition to the *Zamache* the professional school system was enlarged and much effort was invested in technological training at all levels of schooling. The quality of schools in villages close to big cities or main roads was higher than that in the more remote areas. This was true for the entire country and particularly for the schools in the Jewish villages. Those Jews who were described by travellers as 'eager to study' found their place in the new systems and some even got as far as the University of Addis Ababa. Our informant stated that in the past the number of Jewish school students was low but that, since the 1970s, the numbers have increased dramatically and that 'even girls joined schools'!³²

The enrolment of girls in school was a major change in the education of Jews. Traditionally girls were not formally educated, and their entrance into the educational system caused a series of changes in the rural social structure. Girls in school were exposed to massive communist propaganda which emphasised the equal role of women in society. As a result, these Jewish girls no longer tolerated the limitations imposed by traditional society: some of them refused to

²⁹Information on the traditional craftsmen was given by Mathiew Elias.

³⁰For further details on the rate of illiteracy see *Every Ethiopian Will Be Literate and Will Remain So*, a publication of the National Literacy Campaign Coordinating Committee, (Addis Ababa, 1981).

³¹The *Jewish Agency* was started by the late Haim Weizman in 1929, before the state of Israel was founded, in order to take care of Jews all over the world and serve as an aid agency when needed. On the *Ort* system see L. Rapaport, *The Lost Jews* (New York, 1980).

³²R. I. Ashkelon, May 1984.

stay in *nida* huts;³³ some rejected their traditional role of bringing water; others left their villages in order to attend high schools or to work. These changes exposed Jewish women to greater contacts with Christians and, in some cases, led to intermarriage. The desire to go to Israel also affected the girls and young women. Whereas previously only men had participated in such ventures, many girls and young women now joined groups which crossed the border.

The reduction in illiteracy, the expansion of the school network, and political indoctrination all affected the social structure in Jewish villages. The gulf between the young educated generation, some of them orientated towards the left, and the elders, grew wider. The former refused to follow the traditional way of life and challenged the elders' authority. In a short while two circles were created in the villages: the orthodox, who believed that anyone leaving the village should be excommunicated, and the educated, who favoured modernisation. The formation of these two groups further encouraged the exodus of youngsters from the villages to urban areas, where they could join political forums and committees.

An additional factor affecting the traditional power structure is that, since the middle of the 1970s, significant relations between Jews and Christians have developed. This is true primarily for the younger generation. Jewish youths became full members in several of the *Derg's* organisations in which Christians (as well as Muslims and others) were members. Some Jewish members held important roles in these organisations and there is hardly any evidence of religious discrimination.³⁴ Contact with Christians was also made in the army and the security forces. We have information of an army unit in which most of the soldiers and the head officer were Jewish. In general the army was known for its good treatment of Jewish soldiers (better than the treatment they received during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie). The salaries were good and there was no religious discrimination.³⁵ Jews served in the security forces and there are no reports of political purges of Jews (although reports of such actions against certain Christian sects have emerged). On the contrary, the regime's confidence in the Jews appears to have grown on the grounds that, 'they as a minority will never try to rule the country'.³⁶

³³ During the days of menstruation and after giving birth, Ethiopian Jewish women traditionally moved to separate small huts (*nida*) until purification.

³⁴ Asafa Farade, Tel Aviv, June 1984; Avreham Sahalu, Beer-Sheva, February 1984. The names of some of the Jews holding important roles cannot be specified for obvious reasons.

³⁵ An informant from Gondar who reported that one of his family members was in this unit, Jerusalem, January 1985.

³⁶ Yonah Bugale, Petah-Tikva, January 1984.

Conclusion

After the revolution the *Derg* published a number of statements explaining its policy concerning all aspects of life, including the role of religion in the 'new Ethiopia'. On the basis of these statements the *Derg* was seen by many Ethiopian and foreign observers as an anti-religious communist regime. This impression was strengthened by a misinterpretation of the *Derg's* policies. We have suggested that these policies were motivated mainly by the need to attain national unity. This the *Derg* attempted to achieve by undermining all separatist — or potentially separatist — organisations. Since, in Ethiopia religious and ethnic affiliations often overlap, the *Derg's* measures against such organisations were seen as an expression of its anti-religious outlook.

In addition to changes wrought by the *Derg's* actions against religious-ethnic organisations, other changes occurred within the Jewish community itself. These socio-economic changes resulted from government policies in spheres other than the religious: agrarian reforms and land redistribution, the illiteracy campaign, military conscription and overall economic reorganisation. Finally, the impact of the 1983-87 demographic upheaval cannot be underestimated, and its effects on the organisation, structure and cohesion of the remaining religious-ethnic community warrants further investigation.