

# Emperor Tewodros II and the Antithesis Between Modernity and Tradition in Ethiopia

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**Abstract:** In the western world, the genesis of modernity lies in the negation of custom, tradition and authority and in return the exercising of rationality that enlightens the world. Such a quest of the rational subject is believed to lead to a technical mastery of the environment. Modernity rests on the antithesis between tradition and modernity, where tradition is a seat of custom and conventional authority, and the idea of modernity signifies novelty and perfection. In the Ethiopian context, conventional views on modernity narrowly focus on instrumental rationality, economic development and imitation of western cultural values. Carrying out a thorough investigation of Ethiopia's history reveals that there are many precursors to the Ethiopian discourse on modernity. Some are literary and artistic and others situated in visions of development and societal progress. One Ethiopian vision of modernity is found in the system of administration introduced by Emperor Tewodros II. Ending the era of the Zemene-Mesafint, the emperor laid the foundations for the modern Ethiopian state, in the process entering into a conflict with the church and established authority. This paper engages in a philosophical analysis of the notion of modernity to show how Emperor Tewodros II made lasting contributions to Ethiopia's modernity by questioning the authority of the church, instituting a modern system of administration and trying to accelerate technical progress through the building of a military power as foundation to Ethiopia's modernity.

**Keywords:** Modernity, Eurocentrism, Westernization, Modernization

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## 1. Introduction

Currently one witnesses a discontent with conventional models of development and modernization that are founded on material progress and the application of science and technology. Such criticism tried to identify the limitations of developmental theories that are Eurocentric in setting western cultural values and instrumental rationality as the goal of all civilizations. The attempt to seek an alternative resolution and conception of modernity, usually concentrates on what is neglected, suppressed and discarded out of the conceptions of western modernization [6]. To this extent the role of indigenous knowledge, the wisdom of non-western societies and alternative conceptions of modernity emerges as a focal point of analysis.

Just like other developing nations of the world, in the Ethiopian context modernity is seen as a foundation of development and societal progress. Despite the fact that Ethiopia was not colonized, still a narrow conception of

modernity as a progress driven by instrumental mastery of the environment, dominates discussions of modernity in the Ethiopian context. Such a vision manifests itself on individual visions of a better life as well as societal rationalization. Whereas for the Ethiopian subject, modernity is seen as imitating the model of western rational man, at the level of society, modernity is seen as embodying the values of western industrialist societies and values of consumerism and individualism. An alternative reading of Ethiopian modernity going beyond Eurocentric modernization reveals that Ethiopia just like other nations of the world is endowed with a unique culture, normative systems, conceptions of reality and societal progress. As such, the Ethiopian conception of modernity must pay attention to Ethiopian precursors of modernity found within literary, artistic and philosophical forms of expression among others. The Ethiopian vision of modernity must also be a critical articulation of the Ethiopian experience and existential predicament while at the same time glancing at the idea of modernity in general seen as a process of individual

and societal rationalization.

Emperor Tewodros II started the process of the modern Ethiopian state formation, after bringing an end to the ear of the princes. Introducing a unique vision of Ethiopian modernity, the emperor sought to lay out the normative and instrumental foundations to Ethiopian modernity. To this extent, the emperor sought to challenge the existing orthodoxy by trying to question church authority, building a centralized administration and building a modern army [4]. Whereas at the domestic realm the emperor tried to create a unified Ethiopian state ruled by strict rules and laws, in the foreign stage he sought to establish relations with the major European powers as a way of accelerating instrumental growth.

I will start off my discussion by discussing the question of modernity and how modernity is generally perceived as a process of westernization. This is followed by the second section in which I discuss the dominant ways in which modernity is perceived in the Ethiopian context and how this has engendered a view of progress as one that is economic, material, technical and instrumental. In the third section in return I will discuss an alternative Ethiopian vision of modernity presented throughout the modernization schemes of emperor Tewodros II. I will here discuss the significance of the emperor's vision to the attempts to understand the nature and realization of modernity in Ethiopia.

## 2. Challenging Idea of Modernity as a Process of Westernization

The concept of modernity is predicated on the assumption that the exercise of rationality at an individual level leads to overall progress and emancipation. Alongside these lines, modernity's departure from pre-modern times is seen in the interrogation of tradition and authority and in return the search for truth in the force of the better argument and continual dialogue. Such quest is an individual pursuit because it's the individual who through the power of logic scrutinizes custom and tradition. It is also founded on the idea that enlightenment and rationality is the only path to progress and development. As the German philosopher Habermas puts it, "the demythologization of worldviews means the desocialization of nature and the denaturalization of society." [13].

For the proponents of the modern project, rationality leads to uncovering the nature of reality, existence and the nature of Being. Socially, modernity leads into positive interpersonal relations and social institutions that are accountable and transparent in their nature. Politically, modernity leads into the institution of a democratic culture and individual freedom. Technically, it leads into a control over the environment. Generally, the more we become modern, the more the goals of human life are attained. Here, "freedom and rationality will lead to social progress through virtuous, self-controlled work, creating a better material, political and intellectual life for all" [6]. Using the arguments of Anthony Giddens in his *The Consequences of Modernity* one could argue that in the world of globalization one finds the ultimate realization of the goals,

dreams and aspirations of the modern age on a global level. Here, modernity is conceived as "modes of social life or organization which emerged in Europe from about the seventeenth century onwards and which subsequently became more or less worldwide in their influence." [12] Thus globalization entails not a farewell to modernity but a heightened stage in which modernity is raised to a universal ideal.

Despite the attempt to herald scientific progress, technological advancement and human progress in the world of globalization as the realization of modernity, some especially African philosophers argue that modernity is Eurocentric in situating Western modern society as the goal of human civilization and also degrading non-Western cultures and indigenous knowledge. The historical encounter amongst African and Western systems of knowledge is made possible by the colonial legacy. Still there are diverging views in relation to the type of colonization that was used in order to subdue the colonized. Many scholars argued mental colonization was used to justify the rule and conquest of Europeans and that it had an aim of making the colonized people inferior and of deserving domination. Here Kwasi Wiredu argued for a need of conceptual decolonization, whereas Ngugi centered on exposing cultural colonization and Ehiedu Iweriebor focused on interrogating the psychology of colonialism.

Although, African states begun to gain independence and hence the era of colonialism started to end following the Second World War. There is only a change in the mode or type of colonialism and that colonialism didn't really end. What's raised here is the issue of mental colonization. As Ngugi WaThingo puts it "Berlin of 1984 was affected through the sword and the bullet. But the night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the mourning of the chalk and the black board. The physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom. But where the former was visibly brutal, the latter was visibly gentle" [19] Thus, Western systems of knowledge propagated the superiority of the West and inferiority of non-Western indigenous knowledge.

For Eze, behind the greatest modern European philosophies and philosophers, was held an exclusivist assumption that Europe possessed the greatest achievements in human history, and that it should be imitated. For these views "Europe is the model of humanity, culture, and history in itself" [10] Eze holds that, African philosophy labors under a betrayal of modern reason which meant freedom and emancipation for the European, and exploitation for the other. Furthermore, the Eurocentric assumptions are being echoed in the dominant philosophical, artistic, literary and economic models these days which all posited Europe as the normative ideal. Currently, abiding by Western models, Africans are trying to imitate liberal democracy, free market economy and an education guided by a science and technology that is detrimental to Africa's own indigenous forms of knowledge and philosophy. Having looked at the narrow conception of modernity as westernization, let's analyze the prospect of

laying the ground for a process of modernization within the Ethiopian context.

### 3. Eurocentrism and the Ethiopian Discourse of Modernity

The analysis of modernization in Africa for Klinghoffer [15] needs to go beyond modernity as a universal thesis, advocacy of consumerism, popular participation as a goal of modernity and economic development as the basis of modernization. Thus, “economic modernization in Africa does not necessarily lead to political development; problems of instability, administrative in- efficiency, and inability to exercise state authority occur even as the economy advances.” [15] There is also a need to unravel the Eurocentric normative assumptions that are at work in African educational systems in the name of realizing scientific and technological progress.

In the Ethiopian context, the introduction of modern education is an integral aspect of the process of modernization continued by emperor Menelik II. Here secular institutions were established and scholarships were being given to students to provide the bureaucracy with the required manpower. Thus, “The functioning of the state bureaucracy, the diplomatic corps, and the economy owed a lot to the modernization of Ethiopian education and the nascent secularization of administrative institutions.” [1] Building on the foundations of Emperor Menelik II, Emperor Haile Selassie introduced a radical reform in the system of education which includes the opening of more schools and establishment of a ministry of education. Still the resistance of the masses to education and the already existing unequal relations amongst members of the society had a negative impact on educational reform.

Bahru Zewde [5] attempts to celebrate Ethiopia’s modernity and entrance into the new millennium must be coupled with an analysis of the contradictions of the past, opening up of a space for equal participation and rational administrative imperative. Thus, “what has been sorely lacking amidst all these festivities is a sober and balanced assessment of the past millennium” [4] Bahru further maintains that the contradictions of Ethiopian modernity could be expressed in the achievements of the two Zar’aYacobs. The first one is the king Zar’aYacob who instituted central administration and strong empire at the expense of total control and the lack of freedom in the life of subjects. The second one constitutes the philosopher Zar’aYacob who was a liberal and rationalist thinker that sought to establish a model for religious pluralism.

Donald Crummey [7] assumes that the need to situate the interaction between modern Ethiopia and Europe needs to go beyond an account of diplomatic relations and integrate reconstructive elements in culture and knowledge systems. Specifically, the adoption of western ideas of modernity in the Ethiopian soil must be analyzed. Crummey claims, “I argue that the relations between Ethiopia and Europe cannot be naively understood for a central component of the relationship,

from the Ethiopian side, was the appropriation of modernity” [7] As such the relations between Ethiopia and Europe must be understood in terms of the uneven power relations dictating the diffusion of western cultural values in other cultures and also the fact that the relation emerged from a body of knowledge that is Eurocentric in its nature.

There is a need to situate the discourse of modernity in the existing realities of the Ethiopian context. There was an attempt to situate the dialectics between the local and global in framing the discourse of modernity in Ethiopia. Understanding modernity required a holistic approach that situated modernity in social, political, value-oriented and economic questions of rationality were being probed. For Andreas Eshete, [2] starting from its genesis, modernity has been an ambiguous project causing controversies centering on questions of, to what extent is modernity a clear departure from pre-modern times? How did it propagate the exercise of subjective rationality, when did it start and where? Based on this, Andreas argues, “I doubt that either the key originating elements can be definitely singled out or when it first made its appearance can be fixed with finality” [2] Furthermore, most conceptions of history are dictated by the myth of historical progress and history as a linear path of enlightenment. Andreas argues that the project of modernity stands even without a recourse to metaphysical systems and cumulative visions of history and one could salvage the notion of modernity as declaring the arrival of the unique present and exercise of subjective rationality to examine the human condition. Thus, “Still, the historical self-consciousness of modernity noted earlier, as well as a sense of its uniqueness, can exist in the absence of any commitment to grand narratives about the course of human history.” [2].

In heralding the prospects of modernity, Andreas also cautions against the other side of modernity manifesting itself in asymmetrical power relations, economic inequality, racism and destruction of human life. Still this doesn’t overlook the fact that modernity provided the stage for human realization in a form of a common cause. Andreas sees calls for justice and antagonism towards feudalism as manifestations of the Ethiopian discourse of modernity. The precursors and multidimensional features of the Ethiopian discourse of modernity are witnessed in diverse conduits such as the written philosophy of ZeraYacob, the Dekike Estifanos, economic modernization propounded by Gebre-Heywat Baykedagn and the political project of modernity that Ethiopian rulers introduced serving bureaucratic, material and technical considerations. Still the most radicalized manifestation of Ethiopian modernity finds expression in the Ethiopian student movement which questions ascribed status, hierarchical relations, and envisions equality, justice and freedom guided by socialist principles. Thus” Socialism was championed because it would serve the aspiration to bring about modernity by revolutionary means.” [2] A second major gateway to modernity found expression in the aesthetic movement of modernism that is less conceptual and more practical and focused in the transient and suppressed. A large continuum didn’t emerge between the student movement and

modernism and” the sensibility of modernism vividly exemplified essential virtues of modernity: individuality, freedom, bold exploration of novel possibilities and a robust worldliness. Even though, it may not have prompted change in the institutions and practices of the practical world” [2].

For Donald N. Levine, most analysis of modernization in the world focus on conceiving cultures as static and limited and nations as the centers of analysis. This overlooks interactions and similarities amongst cultures, cultural dynamism and new networks emerging as a result of such interactions. Thus Levine argues that his approach, “treats modernization not within the contours of a particular nation society, singular or plural, or that adopts an increasingly familiar perspective of the world society. It focuses rather on lines of modernization flow that influence one country to another” [16] For Levine, modernization consists of uniqueness, novelty and advancement also paving the ground for processes of learning with outside cultures. Here, Levine seeks to identify relations amongst the modernizations of Japan characterized by unity, protocol and military strength, Ethiopia’s unique and centralized modernity as well as Rastafarianism in Jamaica. Here, Ethiopia just like Japan sought modernization as a response to outside cultural threat and aggression. Recognizing the striking similarities amongst the modernizations of Ethiopia and Japan attempts were made to include such visions in academia, literary works and to ground the need for technical dominance in a strict form of administration. Thus, “Ethiopian intellectuals became known as ‘Japanizers’. They worked to advance connections between the two states in order to facilitate this transformation” [16] The success of the Ethiopian model of modernization in the face of European threat served to drive the element of decolonization and pan Africanism that fueled the pan African image. Here Rastafarianism consisted of religious, economic, political and cultural elements. Furthermore the elements of Rastafarianism rhymed with the mystic and religious urges of the Japanese youth. Thus, “Jamaica Rasta served as the medium for the appropriation of Ethiopia-derivative elements into modern Japanese culture. [16].

#### 4. Emperor Tewodros II as a Precursor of Ethiopian Modernity

In the previous sections, I have tried to identify the inseparable relation between modernity and eurocentrism and the need to recognize the multifaceted nature of modernity in the Ethiopian context. Here, I argue that rather than conceiving Ethiopian modernity as an extension of the European or realization of the European model of instrumental rationality in the Ethiopian context, the unique features of Ethiopian modernity need to be affirmed. As a practical example, the vision of modernity introduced by emperor Tewodros II needs to be taken into consideration. Rather than conceiving modernity as a universal process of rationalization and situating the destiny of all societies on a similar trajectory, the unique features of different projects of modernity need to

be recognized. This could be achieved through a critical appropriation of the notion of multiple modernities. The idea of multiple modernities conceives modernity as emerging in a particular cultural, social, political and institutional framework. The conception also doesn’t necessarily assume that diverse modern projects will converge on a historical path. Thus, “the core of multiple modernities lies in assuming the existence of culturally specific forms of modernity shaped by distinct cultural heritages and sociopolitical conditions.” [8].

Diverging interpretations of modernity emerge from the conflict between diversity and oneness, experience and seclusion and partiality and objectivity. For Eisenstadt, the world of globalization doesn’t constitute the emergence of modernity in a global scale, conflicts among ideologies or a zeal for the past. On the contrary, one witnesses attempt to reground the project of modernity in different soils and cultural programs. As such, “all these developments and trends constitute aspects of the continual reinterpretation, reconstruction of the cultural program of modernity” [9] Using the notion of multiple modernities one could explore the existence of unique conceptions of modernity in the Ethiopian context.

In observing the quest for modernity in Ethiopia, Paulos Milkias [18] argues that the logical consequences of Ethiopia’s quest for modernization stemmed from Western system of knowledge, education and cultural awareness that seek to dismantle the feudal system and found discomfort with the realities of the Ethiopian condition. Currently in the globalized era it is time to face the implication of such a quest in the antagonism between modern scientific and traditional localized systems of knowledge. From the outset, there was a failure to recognize the antithesis between feudalism and modernization in the discourse on modernity. As such, “feudalism and modernization are by their very nature incongruous and cannot live side by side without creating fissures in the body politic” [18] Grounding itself in the transition from the church to public schools as agents for the dissemination of knowledge and education, being modern in Ethiopia constituted a minimal role of the church and the important role of secular institutions. Thus, “the image of the new political order was drawn in terms of a new ideology: Zamanawi-seletane (modernity) which meant modern institutions, modern schooling, and modern thinking.” [18] Even the genesis of modernity in Ethiopia for Paulos Milkias signified overcoming religion and tradition and is clearly evident in the modernization efforts of emperor Tewodros II. Here Paulos remarks, “not only was Tewodros anti-clerical, but he saw the development of Ethiopia as going necessarily against the influence of the church.” [18] Thus, the ground for the struggle between tradition and modernity also took the form of education and the dissemination of knowledge.

Bahru Zewde argues that the huge interest in emperor Tewodros II in Ethiopian history emanates from several factors. These include his success in emerging from a lower social status to excel in the court life, his zeal for establishing a unified Ethiopian state and the attempt to implant the seeds of modernization in Ethiopia. Bahru argues“ his fascination

emanates from a host of attributes: his meteoric rise from plebeian background to the pinnacle of royal power, his single-minded dedication to the restoration of the power and glory of the monarchy, and above all his compulsive drive to modernize his country.” [5] The emperor was conscious of the underdevelopment of his nation, and as a way out sought to establish relations with European nations to appropriate their latest advancements. I believe that emperor Tewodros II could be seen as a precursor to the Ethiopian discourse on modernity in a number of ways. He brought an end to the era of the princes and set the foundations to the Ethiopian modern state by unifying the different provincialities. Furthermore, he had a firm belief that material wealth is a foundation of modernity and that its radical reforms in the military and land rights that could accelerate Ethiopia’s development. The emperor’s influence is also seen on the thoughts of different intellectual like Gabra-Heywat Baykadan who tried to realize the visions of the emperor.

The emperor above anything else set the foundations to Ethiopian modernity by bringing an end to the Zamana Mesafent. From the outset he set his eyes on a unified Ethiopia and a centralized authority aided by successes in the military and relations with the existing foreign powers of the world. On his rise to the imperial throne, Kasa carefully crafted an image of a ruler who restores Ethiopia’s glory. Such an image is founded on the prophecy of the coming of a certain Tewodros who will pacify the country on the way to greatness. Bearing upon such existing societal narrative, Kasa casted himself as the protector and unifier of the nation and thus also appealed to “an apocryphal writing which lent considerable authority to the idea of a messianic Tewodros.” [17] Beyond anything else, what the emperor instilled in the hearts and the minds of others is the idea that Ethiopia’s glory will be restored under a strong state and that “the old idea of an Ethiopian empire united under a Christian Solomonic monarch was still viable” [17] As Yonas Admasu puts it, “Tewodros, who seems to have started it all with his vision of a untied and modernized Ethiopia, had a helping hand from Menelik II.” [20].

Yonas maintains that the coming to power of emperor Tewodros II by itself signifies the replacement of one symbolic order by another one. The order of the solomonic dynasty as such was replaced by the power of emperor Tewodros II who didn’t trace his lineage into such a bloodline. Yonas remarks here, “It is one of the paradoxes of history (or, is it?), that such a hero should be provided by the very system against which the new generation rose-up-in-pens. One such hero was readily provided by nineteenth century Ethiopia in the person of Emperor Tewodros II” [20] Tewodros’ rise to power as such signified the dawn of a new era, where the turmoil and political intrigues of the era of the princes are replaced by a hierarchical order, established authority and the quest for a glorious nation.

The emperor also laid the foundational blocks to Ethiopian modernity in his belief that a strong state needs to be sustained by a strong material background and economic prosperity. As such, in an attempt to secure a firm foundation for his visions of modernity, the emperor tried to institute a firm material

foundation for his state. He believed that it is a wealthy state that could only introduce such grand measures of modernization. To this extent, he tried to introduce new land ownership rights that subsequently led “into collision with the Ethiopian orthodox church” [20]. This conflict with the established authority that is a key spirit of modernity, only hastened the downfall of the emperor, although he showed in the process that a strong Ethiopian state was not conceivable without challenging the power of the church. Ultimately the emperor failed to realize his goals of societal and structural transformation, for he was challenged by a fierce power struggle in the domestic sphere, and externally, “from the Europeans whom he had expected to come to his aid, he received only indifference or insolence” [20] For Edmond Keller, once he came to power, emperor Tewodros II introduced two major reforms as the foundations of his vision of modernity. First of all, the emperor assumed a highly central role and thereby diminished the power of regional administrators. To this regard, the emperor also eliminated powerful rivals and appointed “trusted officers in his military or members of the royal family” [14] Secondly, the emperor also sought to establish a modern and a well trained army.

Bahru further contends that the success of Emperor Tewodros’s radical visions of modernization ultimately depended in the strength of his military power and the implementation of reforms introduced in the organization of the military. As such, “to Tewodros, who owed his political power more to his military prowess than to his genealogy, the central role of the army must have been even more vital.” [3] The emperor particularly made an effort to restructure the military in terms of its form, abidance to strict rules and access to modern European weapons. At the last resort, the military lacked the vision and persistence that was required to execute the directives set out by the emperor. The efforts of the emperor were not only reserved to the attainment of central authority and instrumental success, but also extended into the cultural realm as well. During the time of the emperor’s rule, besides a process of centralization, Bahru sees “witnessed the birth of a fairly well-developed literary Amharic.” [3] The emperor established a school where students can excel in instrumental and technical knowledge. Still, for Bahru such a quest was not animated by the need to accelerate all rounded development but “with obsession with the manufacture of firearms” [3].

For Bahru, despite all his efforts to introduce programs of modernization that set to establish the foundations for a modern Ethiopian state, Emperor Tewodros II still could not overcome the political factions and divisions brought forth by the Zamana Mesafent. As such, “the military and administrative reforms he envisaged were bereft of economic and technological bases” [3] One particular area in which the force of the Zamana Mesafent was an obstacle to Ethiopia’s modernity is seen in the system of administration that the emperor tried to introduce. Despite the emperor’s effort to institute a highly centralized and strong government, rival groups and political dissidence existed throughout his reign. The emperor as such was not able to curb the power of

regional rulers. Recognizing the contribution of emperor Tewodros to Ethiopian modernity, Andreas Eshete contends that the founders of Ethiopia's modernity including emperor Tewodros II had a deeper vision that the foundation of societal transformation lies in introducing a centralized system of administration. They believed that instrumental success is the key to defend Ethiopia's territorial sovereignty as well as realizing material development. Accordingly, "they were resolved to introduce modern systems of administration and to harness modern technology, both to defend Ethiopia's independence and to deploy her rich human and material resources effectively." [2] The quest for a unified Ethiopian state against foreign aggression and internal instability was initiated by emperor Tewodros II, although it culminated in the efforts of emperor Menelik II.

Emperor Tewodros exerted a huge impact on modern Ethiopian intellectuals. His visions of centralized order, regulation of the relation between the ruler and the people through a strict law and the need to mobilize the masses for developmental endeavors, easily resonated with Ethiopia's intellectuals. One of the intellectuals who strived to realize the goals of the emperor is Gabra-Heywat Baykadan. Bahru argues "His passion for ser'at was picked up by the leading reformist intellectual of the early twentieth century, Gabra-Heywat Baykadan. His small but powerful booklet, *Atse Menilekna Ityopya*, was as much a vindication of the visionary Tewodros as a veiled critique of Menilek" [2] In his work, *Atse Menelik and Ethiopia*, Negadras Gebre-Heywat Baykedagn argues that the development of one's nation and its historiography cannot be separated from one another. Furthermore, for the realization of development and a strong and progressive government, there must be an enlightened society. Here the reason why the modernization programs of Emperor Tewodros were not practically implemented is because of the absence of societal rationalization. [11].

## 5. Conclusion

In today's world, the idea that modernity is an exclusively western product is beginning to be challenged. As part of such a critique, efforts are being made to identify different ways of looking at the idea of modernity especially from the vantage point of non-western cultures. This is predicated on the assumption that since the quest for novelty and societal inventory is an urge that exists in different societies of the world, there is a need to extract the wisdom of different cultures and societies of the world. Within the Ethiopian context, the quest for change and continual progress has always been one crucial element of history. Here different literary, philosophical, economic and political works emerged trying to posit diverging interpretations of Ethiopian modernity. In the realm of politics and administration, nothing parallels the achievements of emperor Tewodros II who saw his task as modernizing the nation and accelerating all rounded progress. The emperor particularly excelled in questioning existing land rights, challenging the power of established authority and laying foundations for instrumental

development. Although the efforts of the emperor were seriously undermined by existing power struggles, the level of literacy of the people and resistance of the army to such dramatic reforms, the emperor still managed to instill the idea that a stronger Ethiopian nation driven by material development, radical reforms and new social, political and economic reality was possible. As such, even today where the question of Ethiopian modernity is at the forefront of intellectual discussions, the contribution of emperor Tewodros II to Ethiopia's modernity needs to be once again explored.

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