

Ethiopia: the People and the Music Died

By LISA DEE

I once sang for Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. I was dressed in the traditional white zoria and shama, and I sang the Amharic welcoming verse in a strained, youthful voice. My Ethiopian friends regarded my performance with awe and envy. It took place in 1968 at a U.S. Army base, Kagnev Station, in Asmara. Ethiopia was different then.

That was before the military coup that eventually brought strongman Mengistu Haile Mariam to power. It was before the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, a secessionist group of the northern province, accelerated its war of independence, and before the conflict in the Ogaden territory where Somalis and Ethiopians fought over national boundaries. It was before 4 million Ethiopian refugees fled their homeland to neighboring countries, where they now live in abject misery.

Today the strategic Horn of Africa, ensnared by its man-made conflicts, is prime territory for a superpower showdown. Famine and drought magnify the difficulties. I can only grieve for the Ethiopian people who must endure the caprices of ideology and flip-flopping political alliances.

In 1968, Americans and their aid were welcome. But Selassie did not want to depend on one great power alone; he accepted aid from as many nations as offered it. Life was certainly not bountiful then, but it was far better than the tragedy that it has become in Ethiopia today.

In 1974, Selassie's monarchy was abolished. A military police state was established under the Provisional Military Administrative Council (the Dergue). In 1975,

Ethiopia was declared a socialist state, and the successful coup was celebrated as the end of corruption. By 1977, the struggle for the soul of the revolution was over; the army had won, the civilians had lost.

The Soviet-backed socialist Dergue immediately nationalized the country's resources and implemented land reforms. To some, the experiment appeared noble. But their hopes were dashed when it resulted in destroying Ethiopia's international credit, which further devastated the impoverished economy. The Soviets provided them with heavy military aid; the Cubans and East Germans gave their officers training, but the communists gave them little else.

Mengistu now faces two major rebellious upheavals, and is using Soviet-backed military repression as the only means of stopping the Eritrean and Somali secessionist groups. Meanwhile, the United States is supplying the Somalis with arms in return for the right to use naval and air facilities, despite the fact that Somalia is a former Soviet client.

While the fighting continues, the civilians are homeless; 90% of the refugees are women and children. Because Ethiopia declared itself a socialist state, most Western countries have cut off economic aid. As both superpowers occupy themselves with an arms buildup, which could easily escalate into a showdown should Somalia increase its support for the rebels in Ethiopia's Ogaden region, the civilians' basic human needs are being violated grotesquely. Who now will champion human rights?

One incident exemplifies the tragic irony that is the Horn of Africa. Deposed Emperor

Selassie willed his entire fortune to the people of Ogaden, who suffer most from natural disaster and man-made conflict. After Selassie died, Swiss banks refused to turn over the money because of rules that prevent money from being released to the successors of a military coup. The civilians lost again.

Many international religious and relief organizations have launched appeals for further aid. But the \$10 million that those organizations provide in famine relief could be more useful if some of the funds were pumped into developmental projects targeted for the future of the people. Short-term and long-term aid are essential. The construction of water systems, for example, could help reverse the effects of drought and make some land fertile again.

Political upheaval and war cause large sums of money to be spent on relief. They shatter the development process that could prevent the flow of refugees. And they erode stability. Only greatly enlarged international aid could break the vicious cycle. But politics prevents that.

I think often of the friends I left behind in Asmara. I know that many have died and still others have lost their homes—even if those homes were only straw-thatched tukal huts. Americans are no longer their friends; political alliances have changed.

It will be a long time before we sing together again.

Lisa Dee is a graduate student in journalism at USC. She lived in Ethiopia from 1966 to 1970 as a military dependent with her family.