

The Roads of Ethiopia: Italian Occupation and Mengistu's Regime

By Bailey McDonald

Meti Birabiro is the product of and a dweller in a fraught moment in Ethiopia's history. In her memoir, *Blue Daughter of the Red Sea*, Birabiro's musings on her youth reveal the many moments in Ethiopia's history that have had a direct effect on her life; her half-Italian siblings are remnants of the Italian occupation, her swollen belly is a corporeal manifestation of the 1984 famine, her sudden departure from Ethiopia is a survival tactic in the wake of Mengistu's fall. As a vessel shaped by these aspects of Ethiopia's history, Meti's experiences can show the lived effects that this history had on Ethiopian peasants. Using Meti's experiences with movement through Ethiopia as a starting point, I will examine how roads in Ethiopia were used as a political tool during the Italian occupation in 1935-1941 and under Mengistu's rule from 1977 to 1991.

In *Blue Daughter of the Red Sea*, Meti eschews a traditional linear narrative and instead gives her readers snapshots of moments in her life that, though discrete, create a larger image of her life and her travels. Meti was born in Dire Dawa Ethiopia in 1979.¹ Her family was made up of her Mother, Meti's half-brother and sister, and a step-father (notably not the father of her half-siblings). The details of Meti's life in Ethiopia are clouded by her poetic, allegorical, nonlinear prose style, but several themes of her time in Ethiopia are apparent. In brief, Meti was born into an extremely poor, extremely catholic household. She had access to education, but did not enjoy school as she felt bullied by her peers and teachers. Her childhood was colored by ongoing fascinations with her origin and with her muslim neighbor; particularly his prosperity. Her family life was unstable and her brother was regularly in trouble with the law. An unclear

¹ Vicky Elliott, "Berkeley: Writer's Life After Ethiopia Produces Clarity," *SF Gate*, Oct. 8, 2004.

progression of events led Meti's mother to send her out of Ethiopia to Italy to stay with Meti's half-sister when she was in her pre-teens. In the book, Meti does not know why she must leave Ethiopia, only that the reason is political. Given that she left around 1990-1993, it is likely that her departure was related to Mengistu's fall.

As I am focusing only on Meti's movement within Ethiopia, I will make only a few notes about her life after she leaves. She lives in Italy until she is sixteen, at which point she attempts to move to Vancouver on another Ethiopian woman's passport. Her fraud is discovered during a layover in LAX. Following this, Meti applies for and is granted asylum in the US as a political refugee. She stays in LA for a few years and eventually earns a degree in comparative literature from UC Berkeley. She travels often, visiting friends, new cities, returning to Rome, but she never returns to Ethiopia for fear of government persecution.

Roads Under Mengistu

Meti began her life in the midst of the Ethiopian Civil War. Six years before she was born, in 1973, Ethiopia was hit with a famine that claimed the lives of an estimated 200,000 people.² In 1974, in the aftermath of the famine, emperor Haile Selassie was removed by the socialist party, the Derg, in a coup that ultimately brought Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam to power in 1977. This coup began a civil war that would continue until 1991. Under Mengistu's socialist dictatorship, he facilitated the slaughter of thousands of his political opponents between 1977 and 1979 in what has become known as the "Red Terror". Though the Red Terror ended in 1979, instability remained in Ethiopia. Beginning in 1983 Ethiopia was hit by famine again. This

² "Ethiopia Profile- Timeline," BBC News. Accessed May 5, 2019.

famine lasted a year and claimed the lives of 1.2 million people while displacing another 2.5 million.³ Mengistu held power until May 1991, when advancing forces from the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front led him to flee to Zimbabwe. Following Mengistu's departure, Meles Zenawi came into power-- a shift that ended the Ethiopian Civil War. In the background of this civil war, Ethiopia was also engaged in conflicts with Somalia and Eritrea.⁴

It's no surprise then that, born into a civil war, Meti's early years in Dire Dawa are very hard on her. Compounding the realities of war, Meti's home life is difficult. Her house is continually filled with her mother's cruel, gin-drinking clients. She is bullied by her peers and teachers at school. She is the poorest of her friends and finds herself insecure and depressed due to this fact (among others). On top of this, her step-father and her brother are always butting heads, often resulting in her brother being sent to jail.

On one occasion, after a violent interaction between Meti's half brother (whom she admiringly calls "the prince") and her stepfather (less admiringly dubbed "the vampire"), the police appear. Meti worries that the prince will be taken to jail, but at the same time reflects that, "jail is much better and closer than the other abode... The other place is way too far away and petrifying. How many hours to get there? And by foot. Under that fiery sun."⁵ Meti's worries here indicate that this is a trip she's had to make before. She is obliged to make the trip again, as her brother is sent to the other abode (prison) for three months.⁶ During his tenure there, Meti and her mother visit him once a week, walking for hours each time to get there and back. Meti doesn't specify when this takes place but, given that she is a young girl, it is in the mid-1980s.

³ Alex De Waal, "Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia," An Africa Watch Report, New York, NY, 1991.

⁴ "Ethiopia Profile- Timeline," BBC News. Accessed May 5, 2019.

⁵ Meti Birabiro, *Blue Daughter of the Red Sea*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004, pp.48-49

⁶ Meti Birabiro, *Blue Daughter of the Red Sea*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004, pp. 54

At this time, Dire Dawa is a large city in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has a highway system⁷, Dire Dawa has a functional road system, and some level of transit exists between cities.⁸ The infrastructure is there, and it is free to use, but it is accessible only to those who have some way to access a vehicle. As a poor family with no car, no bike, and no money to take public transit, Meti and her mother are not in a position to take advantage of the infrastructure regularly (although they are able to afford a bus or train every now and then). Because of their poverty, they must walk the long, arduous walk to the prison. Meti's modes of travel in Dire Dawa, limited as they are, are more numerous than those of many of her neighbors. Meti and her mother have the time to spend hours on a trip once a week, they have the geographical knowledge to get to the prison, and they have the physical ability and mental stamina to walk for miles in the sun.

While Meti and her mother were walking to visit the prince in prison, Mengistu was enacting a peasant relocation program. Framed as a response to drought and famine in the north, the government forcibly relocated of 600,000 peasants from northern to southern Ethiopia between 1984 and 1988.⁹ Contrary to the government's claims, it is generally accepted among scholars that relocation was actually a counterinsurgency tactic in response to rebel control in the north.¹⁰ In order to facilitate this mass movement, the government took advantage of the highway system. In December 1984, the New York Times reported that an "armada of battered buses and trucks," along with soviet planes, had carried 70,000 northern peasants south towards Addis Ababa.¹¹ In 1985, the Save the Children Fund UK reported that the Ethiopian government had

⁷ J. Baker, "Developments in Ethiopia's Road System," *Geography* 59, no. 2 (1974): 150-54.

⁸ Meti mentions roads in Dire Dawa and trains as transit in Ethiopia throughout *Blue Daughter of the Red Sea*.

⁹ Alex De Waal, "Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia," *An Africa Watch Report*, New York, NY, 1991, pp. 210

¹⁰ Alex De Waal, "Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia," *An Africa Watch Report*, New York, NY, 1991, pp. 210

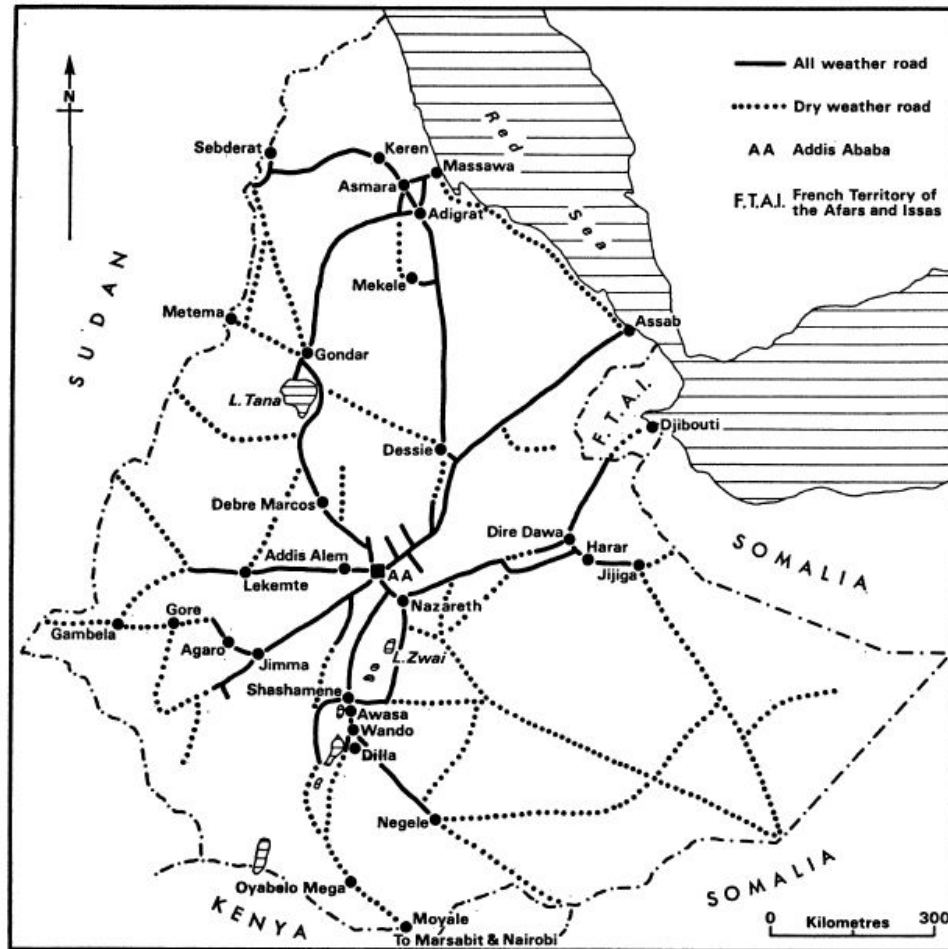
¹¹ Philip M. Boffey, "Ethiopia Moving 1.5 Million People From Famine," *New York Times*, Dec. 14, 1984.

commandeered their busses for use in the relocation efforts.¹² As an entity with access (however legitimate) to trucks and busses, the Ethiopian government had the ability to take advantage of the highway system. This ability, combined with political power and motivations, meant that Mengistu's government actively used the roads as a tool in its bid to retain power. The roads that were practically useless to the peasants, as we have seen through Meti's experiences, were used as a tool by Mengistu to forcibly relocate them. Without the highways, relocation could still have taken place, but it could not have reached the extreme numbers that it did with the highways.

The roads became functional to the peasants as conduits for movement during the relocation, but after that brief moment of functionality, they became inaccessible once again. This was observed by a New York Times reporter who visited a relocation village 50 miles outside of Addis Ababa. She reported that, although there were roads nearby the village, "It is questionable how much the roads are being used. If the farmer doesn't have cash, what does it mean being closer to the asphalt road for transport."¹³ This episode of relocation makes it clear that, under Mengistu's rule, the roads were a tool for government oppression. Though they were technically available to the peasants, most peasants did not have the means to take advantage of the roads, and were exposed to the roads' transportive power only as it was used in their oppression.

¹² Alex De Waal, "Evil Days: Thirty Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia," *An Africa Watch Report*, New York, NY, 1991, pp. 214

¹³ Jane Perlez, "Ethiopia Drives Its Peasants Off the Good Earth," *New York Times*, Sep. 12, 1989.



Ethiopia's Major Roads in 1974¹⁴

Roads Under Italy

As part of a family that has Italian heritage (her brother and sister are the children of an Italian father), Meti has a relationship to the roads of Ethiopia that began long before her birth.¹⁵ In 1935, following a long history of colonial interest in the country, Italy invaded Ethiopia.¹⁶ As they were planning their advance into Ethiopia, Italy knew that the rough terrain would be a

¹⁴ Via J. Baker, "Developments in Ethiopia's Road System," *Geography* 59, no. 2 (1974), pp. 151

¹⁵ Vicky Elliott, "Berkeley: Writer's Life After Ethiopia Produces Clarity," *SF Gate*, Oct. 8, 2004.

¹⁶ Paul B. Henze, "Ethiopia," *The Wilson Quarterly* 8, no. 5 (Winter, 1984): 99-124, accessed May 2, 2019 pp. 110-116

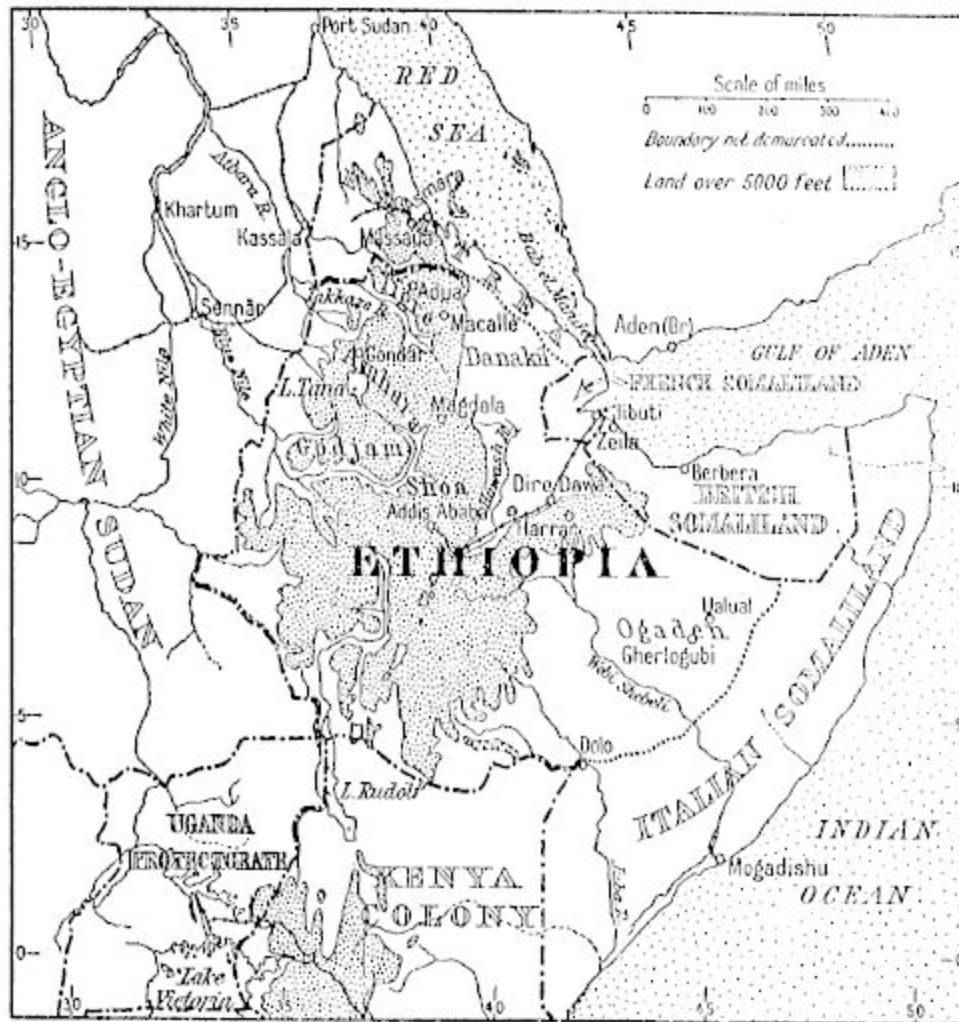
major stumbling block in their mission.¹⁷ When entering Ethiopia from Eritrea, there are deep ravines, mountains, and a particular type of red soil that is unpassable when wet. At the time, there were no bridges in the area and the only roads were dilapidated. As such, Italian troops entering from the north were obliged to build bridges and roads into Ethiopia from Eritrea. In 1935 and 1936, the New York Times published reports detailing the roads that the Italians had built as capable of carrying food, artillery, and the tens of thousands of soldiers making their way into the country.¹⁸¹⁹ These roads were considered to be a leading reason behind the success of Italy's campaign.²⁰ Foreshadowing their later use by Mengistu, the roads the Italians built originated as tools in their quest to conquer Ethiopia.

¹⁷ H. Scaetta, "Geography, Ethiopia's Ally," *Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 1 (1935): 62-70, accessed May 8, 2019, pp. 64-66

¹⁸ Russell Owen, "Italy's New Methods Win: Roads, Artillery and Poison Gas, Backed By Money, Break Ethiopian Resistance," *New York Times*, May 3, 1936.

¹⁹ "Italy Builds Roads in North." *New York Times*, Dec. 12, 1935.

²⁰ Russell Owen, "Italy's New Methods Win: Roads, Artillery and Poison Gas, Backed By Money, Break Ethiopian Resistance," *New York Times*, May 3, 1936.



Ethiopia's Geography²¹

After the invasion, during the occupation, the road building continued. In May, 1937, 107,000 men were at work building roads.²² By September 1938, it was reported that the Italians had built over 2,000 miles of road with the intention to “connect future agricultural regions with the larger villages, or to provide outlets for the interior to the five main ports of the colony.”²³ The same report reveals that these roads, though Italian by design, were built by a mixture of Italian and Ethiopian laborers. Ethiopian men were required to work on the roads but were paid

²¹ H. Scaetta, “Geography, Ethiopia’s Ally,” *Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 1 (1935): 62-70, accessed May 8, 2019, pp. 63

²² Robert Gale Woolbert, “Italy Closes A Year As Master of Ethiopia,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1919.

²³ Leo Isaacs, “Italy’s Record in Ethiopia,” *Current History* 49, no. 1 (Sep 01, 1938): 25-29, accessed May 3, 2019, pp. 26.

only a ninth of what their Italian counterparts made. These roads, the post-invasion roads, were built in the name of colonial aspirations for Ethiopia. They were built so that Italy could expand the colony both as a home for Italian colonists and as a center of production. These roads were built by the exploitation of Ethiopians in order to further exploit them. Ethiopians never wanted these roads, but instead had the roads forced upon them as a tool of oppression. It is a bitter fact of history that after the Italians left, the roads continued to be used against the interests of Ethiopian peasants, this time by their own government.

Leaving Ethiopia

In another bit of historical irony, Italy eventually becomes Meti's escape from political persecution in Ethiopia. When she is in her pre-teens, Meti's mother begins taking her on strange trips to Addis Ababa.²⁴ Although her mother never reveals the nature of the trips, Meti has a feeling that they are "fugitives." An interruption in a train ride to Addis Ababa leads her mother to a nervous breakdown in which she demands that Meti pray, as "God hears better children's prayers." These trips to Addis Ababa end in Meti's mother sending her out of Ethiopia to live in Italy with her sister. Once Meti has left Ethiopia, she never returns. I can only speculate about Meti's mother's reasons for sending her abroad, but because of the timeline of events, and Meti's fear of returning to Ethiopia, I believe that her departure was directly related to Mengistu's fall and her mother's fear of political persecution under Meles Zenawi and the Tigray People's Liberation Front. If this is the case, then Italy, the country that provided the means for Mengistu to forcibly relocate Ethiopian peasants, became a refuge for an Ethiopian peasant who had to

²⁴ Meti Birabiro, *Blue Daughter of the Red Sea*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004, pp. 61-2

leave the country as a result of Mengistu's misdeeds. The implications of this series of events are many, but they are a discussion for a different time. So, I will leave you to ponder the odd ways in which history unfolds, as exemplified by Meti's story.

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