East Asia and Ethiopia in Modern World History: A Preliminary Study

Furukawa Tetsushi

現代史における東アジアとエチオピア
——予備的考察

古川哲史

Introduction

In history studies and history education, a broad comprehension of historical issues with global perspectives is increasingly important. This is of course deeply connected with the current rapid and dynamic changes in the world arena, though the world has consisted of its various regions influencing mutually since ancient times.

This paper deals with some aspects of the relationship between East Asia and Africa in the modern period. While historical relations between South Asia and Africa have been studied by concerned scholars, those between East Asia, including China, Korea, and Japan, and Africa have not been well examined by academics. There are some difficulties with this topic, such as the large scale of the theme and the limited availability of records in various countries. Additionally, historical studies of Asia or Africa have tended to be treated within the context of national histories or continental frameworks and often within the setting of their relations with Western countries. Currently, more than ever, we see direct interactions between East Asians and
Africans on the global stage. Such trans-regional factors caused by Asia-
Africa contacts are having a large impact on world affairs. Therefore,
studies of both historical and current issues on this broad topic are becoming
significant academic tasks.

This paper, a preliminary work of the author’s research project entitled
“East Asia and Africa in World History,” examines relations between East
Asia and Ethiopia in the 20th and 21st century. First, the paper focuses on
Japan’s relations with Ethiopia, and then it turns to the relations with
Ethiopia of the Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea) and of the
People’s Republic of China (hereafter China).

**Some Aspects of Japanese Relations with Ethiopia**

After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, often regarded as the beginning of
Japan’s modernization, the Japanese intellectuals seriously began to pay
attention to world affairs including those in Africa. Colonial activities and
rules or managements of European nations in the African continent were
their particular concerns.

As for Ethiopia, the First Italo-Ethiopian War of 1895–96 drew political and
military interests of the Japanese government and the army. Ethiopia
defeated the Italian troops at the battle of Adwa in 1896 and turned down
colonial ambition of Italy. This is known as the first victory for Africans
against European powers. It is sometimes compared with the Japanese
victory over Russia in 1905 as both winnings of “colored” nations against
“white” nations around the turn of the 20th century. Although Ethiopia had
been quite affected by the imperial politics of Europe, it kept securing its
own sovereignty.

It was in the 1920s and the 1930s that close Japanese-Ethiopian ties were
formed. The development of the relations had historical backgrounds,
including Japan’s isolated position in international arena, Japanese economic
interests in Ethiopian market, and Ethiopian intellectuals’ views of Japan as
a model of development. In addition, racial factors such as the two “non-
white” independent countries struggling in the white dominated world, were elements to prompt their connections.

Following the opening of a direct commercial shipping line between Japan and East Africa in 1926, the Japanese government sent an economic mission to the region to conduct marketing research in 1927–28. This mission members also visited Ethiopia. In 1927 a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce between Japan and Ethiopia was signed.

In November 1930, Tafari Makonnen was crowned Emperor Haile Sellassie I, and the Japanese government sent its envoy to the coronation. In the 1930s, Japan continued to impress the Emperor and intellectuals in Ethiopia who desired modernization or socioeconomic reform of their country; therefore, the Ethiopian Constitution promulgated in 1931 was quite influenced by the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (the Meiji Constitution of 1889).

In November 1931, the Ethiopian mission led by the Foreign Minister Heruy Walde-Sellassie visited Japan. Heruy was sent to Japan on a special diplomatic mission to salute the Japanese Emperor as well as to see how Japan had developed and whether Ethiopia could follow its line. Heruy’s visit in Japan of about one and half month visibly deepened Japanese-Ethiopian relations. However, it was also said that Heruy’s admiration for Japan as a model of development alarmed the Western powers which did not welcome “a second Japan” in Africa. This cautiousness of the Western countries against the two countries in Asia and Africa also fueled their racism. Those days racial issues were becoming more international, as W. E. B. Du Bois, an influential African American leader of the Black liberation movement, predicted at the turn of the 20th century.

It was the Second Italo-Ethiopian War of 1935–36 that resulted in a setback in Japanese-Ethiopian relations. When Italy invaded Ethiopia in October 1935, Japan’s popular response toward the crisis tended to be pro-Ethiopian. Japanese “nationalist” groups, which had anti-West or anti-white feelings, especially supported Ethiopia and criticized the Italian aggressive activities in
Ethiopia. On the other hand, the Japanese government tried to maintain a neutral position because it was concerned that Japan’s support for Ethiopia and criticism of Italy might provoke Italian and international criticism of Japanese aggression in China. After all, the Japanese government did not give any substantial support to Ethiopia during the crisis.

As the prospect of Italian victory became more certain, the Japanese government gave “tacit” approval to Italian aggression of Ethiopia. Popular pro-Ethiopian activities in Japan also died out rapidly. This crisis undermined Japanese-Ethiopian ties which had been developed since the 1920s. As well as the Manchurian Incident of 1931 in Asia, the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis of 1935–36 in Africa weakened the League of Nations and realigned the “international order” during the years leading up to World War II.

After World War II, the first notable event in Japan-Ethiopia relations was the Ethiopian emperor’s visit to Japan in November 1956. It was Haile Sellassie’s first trip to Japan and he also became the first foreign head of state to call on post-war Japan. During his nine-day stay in Japan which began with the Japanese emperor’s welcome at the Haneda airport in Tokyo, he had an active schedule including a factory inspection and a sightseeing tour of western Japan. (see Picture 1)

In his official statement, the Ethiopian emperor said, “It is a matter of deep personal satisfaction that we find ourselves in Japan — this great Empire and people of the Far East so long admired by ourselves and our people.” “We in Ethiopia have closely followed your political, economic and cultural development and impressive progress in industrialization which you have been able to achieve in a relatively short period of time.” The Ethiopian monarch also placed emphasis on the new unity of the two nations’ participation in the historic Afro-Asian Conference of 1955, often called the Bandung Conference which was held by non-aligned nations in Indonesia.

In 1957 a Japanese-Ethiopian friendship and commerce treaty was signed. Japan opened an embassy in Addis Ababa in the following year. In
November 1960 the Japanese Crown Prince Akihito and Princess Michiko, the present emperor and empress, visited Ethiopia during their Asia-Africa tour (Iran, Ethiopia, India, and Nepal) as a return salute to the Ethiopian emperor. At the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, Abebe Bikila, an Ethiopian national hero of marathon runner, won a race with a new world record and got the second gold medal after his barefoot running win at the Rome in 1960. It was surely a memorable event in Japan-Ethiopia relations, in which names of the runner and his country, Abebe and Ethiopia, were widely printed on the minds of not a few ordinary people in Japan. (see Picture 2)

During the last part of his reign in May 1970, the Ethiopian emperor took his second visit to Japan on the occasion of the World Expo held in Osaka. In his speech at the Expo, he referred to the two nations’ historical similarities as their independence status of non-Western nations. Haile Sellassie also praised Japan’s Expo for having many participants from Asia and Africa and said that Expos were “no longer a monopoly of Europe and America.”

Thus, post-war relations between Japan and Ethiopia, to some extent, began with pre-war ties. However, Haile Sellassie’s feudalistic rule prevented national reforms in Ethiopia, and the war with Eritrea, which had been annexed as a province of Ethiopia in 1961, continued and exhausted the nation. The Emperor’s regime was brought down by the military coup in 1974, and the development of Japanese-Ethiopian relations was undermined by the subsequent military and communist government in Ethiopia.

During the military and communist regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam up to 1991, the Japanese government did not have close political ties with Ethiopia supported by the Soviet Union. In the early 1980s, when a series of famines caused serious damages in Ethiopia and the situation became internationally reported, the Japanese NGO groups as well as the government joined international aid campaigns. In 1984 the Foreign Minister Abe Shintaro visited Ethiopia to observe the situation and pledged to provide financial assistance for food in famine-stricken regions.
At the final stage of the Cold War since the late 1980s, the Mengistu regime lost military support from the Soviet Union and it began to collapse. In 1991 Meles Zenawi, a leader of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), successfully established a new government with alliance of opposition forces. The Japanese government resumed and developed its relations with the new regime in Ethiopia.

In 1998, the Japanese government held the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in Tokyo. The conference was organized in order to raise the Japan’s political and economic presence in Africa and to enforce ties with African countries. A number of leaders of African nations, including Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles, attended the conference. Since the first conference, the TICAD has become one of the major Japanese policies or strategies toward Africa. The second conference was held in 1998, the third in 2003, the forth in 2008, and the fifth in 2013.

In April 2006, Prime Minister Koizumú Junichiro visited Ethiopia. During his three-day-stay in the country, he had meetings with Prime Minister Meles and observed the training center on water development and supply which was built with the aid from Japan. He also visited the headquarters of the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa and offered financial support to AU’s activities. Koizumí became the first Japanese prime minister to make an official call on the Ethiopia and the AU’s head office as well. (see Picture 3)

These Japanese government’s policies toward Ethiopia or Africa also have intended to acquire further supports from African nations to reinforce Japan’s presence in the United Nations and to gain a seat on the UN Security Council. Thus, the Japan’s UN diplomacy cannot ignore current political and economic trends of African nations which possess more than 50 votes.

**Some Aspects of South Korean and Chinese Relations with Ethiopia**

With regard to the Republic of Korea’s relations with Ethiopia, a historical event in modern history was the Ethiopian soldiers’ involvement in the
Korean War of 1950–53. Ethiopia, ruled by the Emperor Haile Sellassie, closely sided with the United States in the Western block and joined the forces of the United Nations mainly led by the U.S. It is recorded that a total of 6,037 Ethiopian soldiers were dispatched, and 122 were killed and 536 were injured during the war. Japan was also involved in the war playing its backup roles. Consequently, a number of Ethiopia troops stopped in Japan and some wounded soldiers were hospitalized and received medical treatments in Japan.

It was in 1963 that the government of South Korea established its official tie with Ethiopia. In May 1968 the Ethiopian emperor visited South Korea. During his stay, the Emperor Haile Sellassie attended the unveiling of a memorial monument for the Ethiopian troops in Chuncheon, a fierce battle area during the Korean War. (Chuncheon, the city in the northeast of the county, and Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, came to sign an agreement of friendship cities later in 2004.) At this occasion of Haile Sellassie’s visit in 1968, a memorial stamp of two nations was issued in South Korea. The stamp showed pictures of Park Chung-hee, the then president of South Korea, and Haile Sellassie which were fringed with *Mugunghwa* (*Hibiscus syriacus*), the national flower of South Korea. (see Picture 4)

After the fall of Haile Sellassie’s regime in 1974 and the subsequent rise of military and communist rules up to 1991, the government of South Korea had no active political developments with Ethiopia. On the other hand, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) attempted to build up its tie with Ethiopia. The government of North Korea established diplomatic relations with the communist Ethiopia in 1975, and provided the Ethiopian government with military and technical assistance.

In 1991 the Ethiopian regime collapsed and a more democratic government lead by Meles Zenawi emerged, and South Korea-Ethiopia relations substantially resumed. South Korea particularly began to find economic opportunities and markets in Ethiopia.

In 2006 the South Korean government held the first Korea-Africa Forum
in Seoul. One of major purposes of the conference was to secure its own access to oil and mineral resources in the African continent. Heads of state and officials from more than 20 African nations attended the conference to deepen their economic ties with South Korea as well as to see if the South Korean model of rapid economic development could be good lessons for them. This Korea-Africa Forum was succeeded by the second forum in 2009, and the third one in 2012.

In July 2011 President of South Korea, Lee Myung-bak, went to Ethiopia and he became the first South Korean leader to visit the nation. President Lee met the Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles and discussed political and economic cooperation and the South Korean development model in recent decades. The year of 2011 marked the 60th anniversary of Ethiopian participation in the Korean War. Therefore, Lee paid a visit to the Korean War Memorial in Addis Ababa and saluted Ethiopian veterans who fought during the war. (see Picture 5)

During his three day visit in Ethiopia, President Lee made a speech before college students at Addis Ababa University. Referring to Ethiopian troops 60 years ago in the Korean Peninsula, he said “their sacrifices safeguarded liberal democracy in the Republic of Korea. The Korean people will never forget your country, Ethiopia, which gave us a helping hand at a time when our countries did not even have diplomatic relations.” Lee also told students of the South Korean intension to help nurture Ethiopian human resources through support in education and training.

South Korea had one of the fastest growing economies from the 1960s to the 1990s and it is still the rapid growing nation in the world. In this respect South Korea continues to attract political and economic attention from Ethiopia and other nations in Africa.

The People’s Republic of China did not establish its firm relations with Ethiopia in the early 20th century. China acted vigorously in favor of Ethiopia when the latter attempted to join the League of Nations in 1923. However, the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis of 1935-36 and the following Italian
annexation of Ethiopia influenced China’s views of the country.

Chinese leaders compared the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis with the Japanese aggression resulting in Japan’s puppet-state Manchukou. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 was regarded as the second Manchurian Incident of 1931. Therefore, the defeat of Ethiopia was considered as a lack of communist movement, and Mao Zedong, for example, used Ethiopia’s fate to motivate his followers to fight with the Japanese rule. Ethiopia was viewed by Chinese communists as a victim of European powers, but also as a “feudal” and “reactionary” state.

In 1949 Mao Zedong, the chair of the Communist Party, proclaimed the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Haile Sellassie’s government in Ethiopia, which was liberated from the Italian occupation with the British support, did not recognize the People’s Republic of China due to its diplomatic position in the Western bloc. The Korean War of 1950–53 also provided unfortunate encounters between China and Ethiopia as opposing sides.

In February 1964 the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai visited Asmara in Eritrea, which had been absorbed into Ethiopia as a province by Haile Sellassie’s regime in 1961. Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), the main armed organization to fight for Eritrea’s independence from Ethiopia, established “official ties” with the Chinese communist government in 1966. China offered Eritrean young leaders political and ideological education as well as military training. Isaias Afwerki, who became the first President of newly independent Eritrea in 1993, was among those members.

It was in December 1970 that China and Ethiopia came to establish diplomatic relations in the more pragmatic Western policies toward communist nations. Haile Sellassie, who tried to expand his influence inside and outside his country through its diplomacy, visited Beijing in China in October 1971. It was the first official visit to China for the Ethiopian monarch and he met Mao Zedong. (see Picture 6) On this occasion, China recognized Eritrea as a part of Ethiopia, while Ethiopia gave its official
recognition of Taiwan as a part of China.

The Chinese government began to rapidly strengthen its political and economic relations with Ethiopia and Africa since the 1990s. The Chinese President Jiang Zemin made a state visit to Ethiopia in 1996. In 2000 the first China-Africa Forum was held in Beijing and the second forum was organized in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia in 2003. In 2006, the Chinese government issued the “China’s African Policy” focusing on economic or business fields, not seeking to intervene in the domestic affairs in the independent nations. The third China-Africa Forum took place in Beijing in 2006, and it was followed by the fourth in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt in 2009 and the fifth in Beijing in 2012.

Recently, China has quite active approaches to African resources such as oil and minerals, and attempted to open markets for Chinese goods. Its large-scale infrastructure projects in Africa have accelerated the flow of Chinese laborers into Ethiopia and many other African countries, even into their rural areas. (see Picture 7) These visible involvements of Chinese businesses in Africa also have caused some political, economic, or cultural frictions with local governments or people. Current trends of China-Africa relations continue causing whirlwinds in both national and international politics and economies.

**Conclusion**

As this paper briefly shows, the relations between East Asia and Ethiopia in modern times present significant academic topics, and they should be examined within the historical contexts of Asia, Africa, and the world. Their contacts, encounters, and ties were created by various connections or movements in world history.

Japanese-Ethiopian relations from the 1920s to the 1930s, for instance, cannot be fully understood without serious consideration of “realpolitik” in the international arena leading up to World War II. Japan and Italy manipulated the fragile position of Ethiopia for the sake of their own aggressive activities
in Asia and in Africa. China’s post-war political views of, and relations with Ethiopia are, in many ways, by-products of Cold War politics. Ethiopian presence in the post-war Korean Peninsula also include historical events resulting from the international regime after World War II. Haile Sellassie’s visits to Japan, South Korea, and China from the 1950s to the 1970s similarly reflect political conditions in East Asia in those days.

As for economic relations, recent Chinese rapid economic involvements with Ethiopia clearly reveal its aim of becoming a prominent figure in the global market. South Korea also has come to regard Ethiopia as a business partner or profitable marketplace for its own economy. Therefore, Japan’s present trends in economic policies and strategies toward Ethiopia and Africa are strongly influenced by activities of those two East Asian nations. The Japanese government and business circles are now forced to reorganize their approaches to Africa, including the TICAD which have been held only in Japan, not in Africa. Thus, competitive rivalry inside East Asia is an indispensable factor in recent economic relations between East Asia and Africa.

Further investigation into these historical relations also leads to redefining practical and theoretical issues in the study of history. It is necessary to reconfigure time and space frameworks in East Asia as well as in Africa. We should consider how we employ time divisions and how we define “East Asia” or “Africa” as the scope or fields of research. Interdisciplinary approaches are needed for this study.

This research surely reveals numerous facts connecting peoples of Asia and Africa. It thereby provides broad perspectives for Asian, African, and world history, and cultivates our worldviews to serve mutual understandings in this global era.
Appendices

Picture 1: The Ethiopian Emperor Haile Sellassie visited Japan in November 1956. His visit, the first one of a foreign head of state to post-war Japan, was widely reported by the Japanese press. This article was Headlined “The Emperor of Ethiopia Arrives at Tokyo” and “The Emperor of Japan Welcomes at the Haneda [Airport].”

(Asahi Shimbun, November 20, 1956)
Picture 2: Abebe Bikila, a prominent marathon runner from Ethiopia, received the gold medal on the center podium at the Tokyo Olympics in October 1964. Abebe was followed by the silver medalist Basil Heatley of Great Britain (Left) and the bronze medalist Tsuburaya Kokichi of Japan (Right).
(The picture postcard of the Tokyo Olympics, the author’s possession)

Picture 3: Japan’s Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro visited Ethiopia in April 2006. Koizumi and the Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi took part in a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony.
(http://www.ethioembassy.org.uk/news/ [accessed November 11, 2013])
Picture 4: The memorial stamp of the Ethiopian emperor’s visit to the Republic of Korea (South Korea) was issued in May 1968. The stamp shows pictures of Park Chung-hee, the President of South Korea, and the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, which are fringed together with *Mugunghwa* (*Hibiscus syriacus*), the national flower of South Korea.
(The author’s possession.)

Picture 5: President of South Korea, Lee Myung-bak, met surviving Korean War veterans at the Korean War Memorial in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in July 2011.
(http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/ [accessed November 11, 2013])

Picture 7: Chinese and Ethiopian workers were building the new African Union Headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in November 2010. China picked up the US $200 million cost and the Ethiopia’s tallest building was completed in 2011. 
(http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/ [accessed November 11, 2013])
East Asia and Ethiopia in Modern World History: A Preliminary Study

Notes

1. This paper is primarily based on my presentation at Otani University: Furukawa Tetsushi, “East Asia and Africa in World History: Some Aspects of Their Relations,” Paper presented at the annual conference of the Otani Society, Otani University in October 2013. Also, the paper partly results from my previous article: Furukawa Tetsushi, “East Asia and Africa in World History: A Case Study of Japan’s Relations with Africa Up to World War II,” World History Studies and World History Education: The Proceedings of the First Congress of the Asian Association of World Historians, Osaka: Osaka University, 2010, pp. 1–10. (CD-ROM)


3. As for Japanese-Ethiopian relations in the 1920s and the 1930s, see Furukawa Tetsushi, “Japan and Ethiopia in the 1920s-30s: The Rise and Fall of Sentimental Relations,” Human and Environmental Studies, Kyoto University, Vol. 8 (December 1999), pp. 135–145.

4. Ethiopians usually do not have permanent family names. They have their personal names followed by their fathers’ names, and they are known by their personal names. Therefore, Ethiopian names cited in this paper follow this convention. (ex. Abebe Bikila is “Mr. Abebe” not “Mr. Bikila”) Concerning Japanese, Korean,
and Chinese names, the family name comes before the personal name. Their names cited in this paper also follow this practice.


6. W. E. B. Du Bois made a famous statement: “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” in his influential book The Souls of Black Folk (1903). Du Bois also wrote an article on the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis from his racial point of view. The article, “Inter-Racial Implication of the Ethiopian Crisis: A Negro View” (Foreign Affairs, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1935), shows his pro-Japanese attitude to criticize Italian aggression in Ethiopia.


includes his firsthand information of African relations with South Korea and North Korea. (http://www.geocities.jp/viva_saharawi_tt/[accessed November 11, 2013])


Acknowledgements

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI (Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C): “East Asia and Africa in World History: A Preliminary Study for International Research Projects,” 2010–2012), and by the Otani University Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute. I thank all of them who gave me academic assistance including moral and financial support.
謝 辞

本稿は日本学術振興会科学研究費補助金（基盤研究 C：研究代表者「世界史における東アジアとアフリカ——国際共同研究のための基盤形成」、2010-2012年度）および大谷大学真宗総合研究所・一般研究助成（同課題、2010-2012年度）による研究成果の一部である。研究活動に便宜を図って頂いた関係の方々に深く感謝します。