

Kebede Michael and the Ethiopia-Japan Academic Partnership: A Review

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Abstract

Kebede Michael, a prominent Ethiopian intellectual, is celebrated for pioneering academic cooperation between Ethiopia and Japan in the 20th century. His book "Japan Indemin Seletenech" stand out as reflections of his vision for Ethiopia's development and his admiration for Japan's modernization model. This review focuses on his strategic efforts to foster bilateral relations through educational and cultural diplomacy, emphasizing his vision of learning from Japan's rapid modernization while maintaining Ethiopia's national identity. We conducted historical and contextual analysis, content analysis of Kebede's works, comparative educational diplomacy framework, based on the books, articles, research papers, and archival documents authored by Kebede and other relevant scholars to analyze his role in shaping Ethiopia-Japan academic relations. The findings highlight his advocacy for Ethiopian students to pursue higher education in Japan, particularly in science and technology fields, positioning Japanese education as a model for Ethiopia's modernization efforts. By critically assessing these sources, the review demonstrates how Kebede's intellectual diplomacy—based on education and cultural exchange—laid the foundation for lasting academic cooperation. Furthermore, it evaluates the long-term influence of his contributions, revealing how his ideas continue to impact current partnerships between Ethiopian and Japanese universities, with important implications for research collaborations, student exchanges, and capacity building.

Keywords: Ethiopia-Japan Relations, Academic Diplomacy, Japan Indemin Seletenech, Kebede Michael, Educational Cooperation, Cultural Exchange

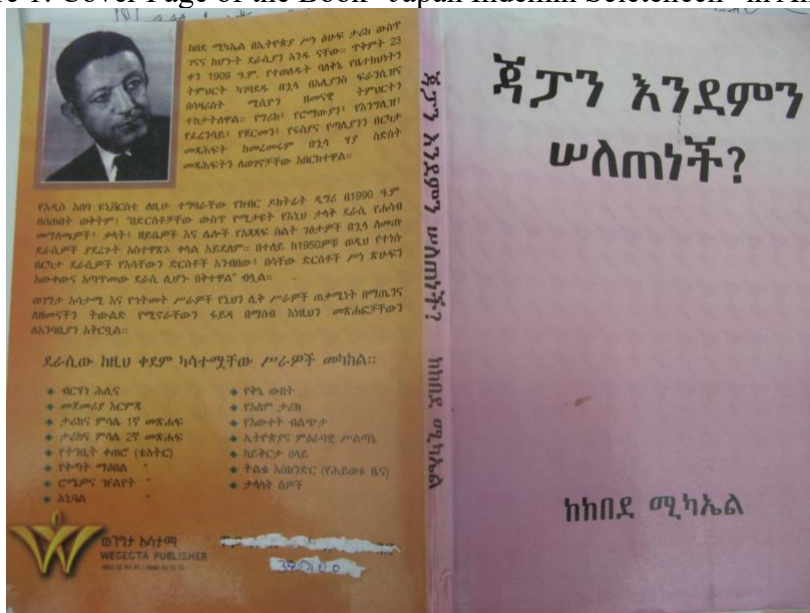
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Introduction

Ethiopia and Japan share a unique and historically significant relationship that has been shaped by intellectual diplomacy, educational exchange, and cultural admiration (Mequanent, 2022). Among the key figures who contributed to this bilateral partnership is Kebede Michael, a distinguished Ethiopian intellectual whose contributions in the mid-20th century laid the groundwork for a deeper academic and cultural engagement between the two nations (Wikipedia, n.d.). Kebede’s classical work, “Japan Indemin Seletenech” (How Japan Modernized), stands as a landmark text, reflecting his impression for Japan’s industrialization and socio-economic modernization during the Meiji era (Michael Kebede, 1956). Through this book, Kebede advocated for Ethiopia to draw lessons from Japan’s experience, emphasizing the need to modernize without compromising national identity and cultural heritage.

Figure 1: Cover Page of the Book “Japan Indemin Seletenech” in Amharic



Despite the pivotal role Kebede Michael played in bridging Ethiopia and Japan academically and culturally, there remains a notable lack of comprehensive research on his contributions and the broader implications of his work. While Ethiopian scholars have occasionally highlighted Kebede’s intellectual legacy, much of the existing literature focuses narrowly on his contributions to Ethiopian nationalism (Tamrat & Belay, 1998) and literary achievements (Abebe, 2023), without exploring the depth of his international influence. Similarly, in Japanese academic circles, the emphasis on Ethiopia-Japan relations often centers on contemporary economic and diplomatic partnerships, with little attention paid to historical figures like Kebede who were instrumental in shaping these ties.

This under-researched area creates significant gaps in our understanding of the historical roots of Ethiopia-Japan academic cooperation (Mequanent, 2022). For instance, there is limited analysis of Kebede’s role in advocating for Ethiopian students to study in Japan or his broader vision of using Japanese educational models as a framework for Ethiopian development. Furthermore, while Kebede’s writings offer a rich source of insights into the cultural and educational diplomacy between the two nations, they remain underexamined in comparative educational studies and international relations literature. This lack of critical engagement hinders a full appreciation of how Kebede’s intellectual efforts influenced and continue to impact the dynamics of Ethiopia-Japan relations. By focusing on Kebede

Michael's contributions, this paper seeks to contextualize his efforts within the broader framework of educational diplomacy and examine their enduring relevance in shaping academic collaborations between the two countries, contributing to a deeper understanding of the historical foundations and potential of Ethiopia-Japan academic partnerships.

Methodology

The study employs a literature-based review, integrating:

- Historical and Contextual Analysis: Situating Kebede's contributions within the mid-20th-century Ethiopian and Japanese socio-political contexts.
- Content Analysis: Examining Kebede's books and articles for recurring themes and strategies in promoting academic diplomacy.
- Comparative Educational Diplomacy Framework: Analyzing Ethiopia-Japan cooperation through scholarly works on international educational exchanges.

Primary sources include Kebede's "Japan Indemin Seletenech" and government records from the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Secondary sources include research articles and books by scholars and researchers. The study is constrained by the availability of primary sources, particularly archival records from the mid-20th century. Additionally, the limited scholarship on Kebede Michael's contributions to international relations necessitates reliance on broader contextual analyses to fill gaps in the literature. Table 1 shows the conceptual framework for this paper, which is grounded in the theory of educational and cultural diplomacy as a tool for international cooperation and national development.

Table 1: Conceptual Framework

Dimension	Key Focus	Illustration in the Study
Intellectual Diplomacy	Role of thought leaders in shaping partnerships	Kebede Michael as a pioneer of Ethiopia-Japan relations
Education as a Modernization Tool	Exchange of knowledge for technological progress	Ethiopian students in Japan; STEM promotion
Cultural Exchange and Identity	Mutual respect and preservation of heritage	Kebede's dual focus on modernization and tradition

Key Themes in "Japan Indemin Seletenech"

Upon its publication, "Japan Indemin Seletenech" garnered significant attention among Ethiopian intellectuals and policymakers. It was celebrated for its forward-thinking analysis and for providing a practical roadmap for Ethiopia's development. The book became a cornerstone of Ethiopia's intellectual discourse on modernization, influencing prominent figures in politics and academia. The work reflects Kebede's admiration for Japan's remarkable transformation during the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912). Kebede perceived Japan's ability to modernize rapidly while maintaining its cultural heritage as a model that Ethiopia could emulate. His work not only celebrated Japan's achievements but also critiqued the socio-economic and political stagnation in Ethiopia, urging his compatriots to learn from Japan's experience.

The Meiji Restoration as a Blueprint for Modernization

Kebede extensively analyzed the reforms undertaken during the Meiji Restoration, which he considered a pivotal period in Japan's history (Wittner, 2022). These reforms, which included the establishment of a centralized government, industrialization, and an emphasis on education, were instrumental in transforming Japan into a global power. Kebede highlighted how Japan successfully assimilated Western technology and practices without undermining its traditions. This balance, he argued, was critical for any non-Western nation seeking to modernize without losing its cultural identity.

For instance, Kebede praised Japan's adoption of Western scientific knowledge while preserving its language, arts, and customs. He contrasted this with Ethiopia's limited engagement with modern education and technology at the time, calling for similar systemic reforms in Ethiopian governance and education to foster progress.

Education as the Foundation of Development

A recurring theme in Kebede's work is the role of education in national development. He admired Japan's focus on universal education during the Meiji era, particularly its emphasis on science and technology. Japan's establishment of specialized institutions like Tokyo Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo) to cultivate a generation of engineers, scientists, and administrators resonated with Kebede's vision for Ethiopia.

Kebede advocated for a similar approach in Ethiopia, urging the government to prioritize education, especially in technical fields.

In his vision for education, he adopted the Japanese approach, emphasizing a practical perspective for all educational efforts in the country. He aspired to emulate Japan's strategy of sending students abroad to learn and replicate advanced technologies, then returning home to adapt those innovations to align with the nation's resources, capabilities, and needs (Tamrat & Belay, 1998). He believed that sending Ethiopian students to study in Japan, particularly in STEM disciplines, would equip them with the skills necessary to drive Ethiopia's modernization. This vision anticipated later scholarship initiatives and educational exchanges, such as those supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which reflect Kebede's early insights. Kebede's work contributed to shaping the Ethiopian government's early efforts to establish educational and cultural ties with Japan. His advocacy laid the groundwork for policies promoting academic exchanges and inspired generations of Ethiopian students to pursue higher education in Japan. For example, Kebede's vision was later realized through initiatives such as the African Business Education (ABE) Initiative for Youth, which continues to foster academic and professional exchanges between Ethiopia and Japan (JICA, 2025).

The Importance of Cultural Identity

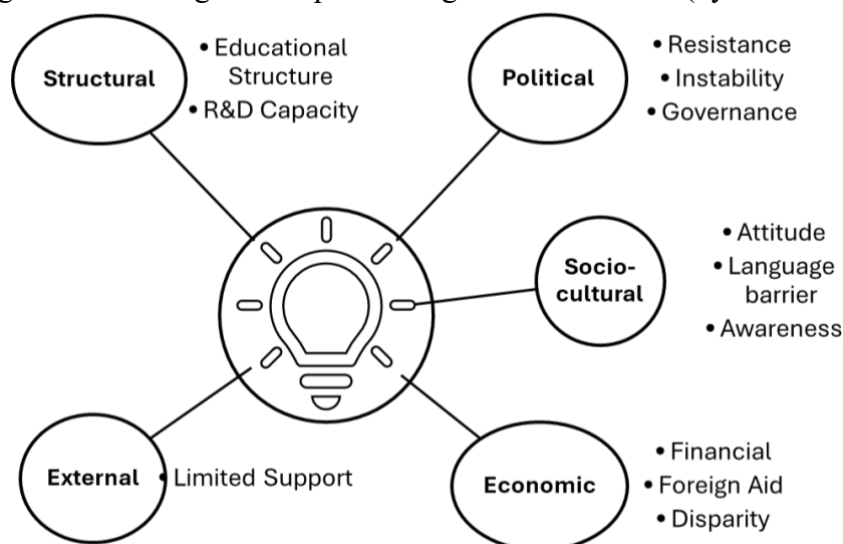
One of the most profound aspects of Kebede's vision is his emphasis on preserving Ethiopia's cultural identity while pursuing modernization. He lauded Japan's ability to maintain its traditional values, such as respect for hierarchy, discipline, and a strong sense of community, even as it adopted Western industrial practices. Kebede warned against the wholesale adoption of foreign customs, arguing that modernization should not come at the expense of Ethiopia's rich cultural heritage and historical legacy.

In “*Japan Indemin Seletenech*”, Kebede frequently drew parallels between Ethiopia and Japan as two ancient civilizations with proud histories (Levine, 2002). He saw Japan’s success as proof that a nation could modernize without losing its soul, a message that resonated deeply in Ethiopia during a time of growing nationalism.

Challenges to Implementing Kebede’s Vision

Kebede’S emphasis on education, technological advancement, and cultural preservation resonated deeply with Ethiopian intellectuals and policymakers. However, translating this vision into practical reforms and policies encountered numerous challenges, which can be categorized into structural, political, socio-cultural, and economic factors. Many of the challenges Kebede faced in implementing his vision remain relevant today. Although Ethiopia has made significant strides in expanding access to education and fostering international academic partnerships, issues such as resource constraints, uneven development, and cultural resistance continue to hinder progress.

Figure 2: Challenges to Implementing Kabebe’s Vision (by the authors)



Structural Challenges

Educational Infrastructure. At the time Kebede was writing, Ethiopia’s education system was underdeveloped and lacked the infrastructure to support the level of modernization he envisioned. The country had a low literacy rate, a limited number of higher education institutions, and insufficient access to technical and vocational training programs (Felleke, 2005). Unlike Japan, which had established a robust educational foundation during the Meiji Restoration, Ethiopia faced a monumental task in creating an education system capable of producing a skilled workforce. For example, Ethiopia’s first modern university, Addis Ababa University, was established only in 1950, decades after Japan had already institutionalized higher education (Teeroovengadum, 2020). The absence of a network of technical schools and research institutions further impeded efforts to align education with the demands of modernization.

Research and Development (R&D) Capacity. Japan’s Meiji-era investments in scientific institutions and technical expertise, which enabled the country to rapidly adopt and adapt Western technologies. Modernization, as envisioned by Kebede, required a strong emphasis

on science, technology, and innovation. The situation has been improved in the recent decades. Citable journals, patents, and technology exports have a significant and positive effect on GDP growth of Ethiopia, while research expenditure does not show any sound statistical evidence effect on economic growth (Agezew, 2024). In the recent decade, increasing R&D activities has proven to be associated with innovation and productivity for Ethiopian firms (Keraga & Araya, 2023). However, Ethiopia still had limited R&D capacity, with few resources allocated to scientific research. Ethiopia hosts a relatively low number of researchers (45 per million people) in comparison to the African average. Recently, the R&D expenditure has quadrupled between the years 2007 and 2013, indicating a commitment to improving the national research environment on the part of the government, however Gross domestic Expenditure in Research and Development (GERD) of 0.6% in 2013 is still considerably lower than the 1% target set by African Union (AU) (Research Consulting, 2019).

Political Challenges

Resistance from Conservative Elites. Kebede's vision for modernization faced significant opposition from conservative factions within Ethiopian society. Many traditional elites viewed modernization efforts as a threat to Ethiopia's cultural and religious heritage. These groups were wary of the influence of foreign education systems and technologies, fearing that they might erode Ethiopia's unique identity and destabilize the established social order (Girma, 2007; Messay Kebede, 2023).

Political Instability. Political instability also posed a significant challenge. Ethiopia underwent a series of political upheavals during the 20th century, including the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 and the subsequent socialist rule of the Derg regime. These shifts in political leadership often disrupted educational policies and long-term planning, undermining efforts to implement Kebede's vision. For instance, during the Derg era, the focus shifted toward ideological education, sidelining the practical and technical aspects of education that Kebede had championed (Messay Kebede, 2023).

Fragmented Governance and Bureaucracy. Japan had a centralized and coordinated governance structure during the Meiji Restoration (Wittner, 2022), a favorable condition for educational reform (Liu, 2019). Implementing large-scale educational and infrastructural reforms required strong governance and efficient bureaucracy, both of which were lacking in Ethiopia at the time. Unlike Japan during the Meiji Restoration, Ethiopia struggled with fragmented governance and limited administrative capacity. This hindered the execution of Kebede's proposals, particularly in the areas of curriculum development and international academic collaboration at the time. Until recent years, Ethiopia has been undergoing further educational reforms aimed at addressing the various challenges that persist in the education system and achieved some progress. Improving the quality, relevance, and efficiency of education, in particular, has been the prime focus of recent reforms (Tena & Motuma, 2024). Higher education in Ethiopia also has been going through significant reforms in recent years. The government of Ethiopia has been implementing various strategies to improve the quality, accessibility, and relevance of higher education. A good example in this regard is the Higher education policy and strategy introduced in 2020 (MOSHE, 2020).

Socio-Cultural Challenges

Cultural Attitudes Toward Modernization. Kebede's vision emphasized the need to preserve Ethiopia's cultural identity while adopting modern practices. However, achieving this balance proved challenging. Modernization was often perceived as synonymous with Westernization, leading to resistance from communities fearing the loss of cultural traditions. In rural areas, where traditional values were deeply entrenched, Kebede's arguments faced significant opposition. The association of modernity with Europeanization created ambivalence towards modernization efforts, as many Ethiopians equated adopting modern practices with abandoning their cultural identity (Giorgis, 2010). The Ethiopian Japanizers, a group of intellectuals including Kebede, sought to emulate Japan's model of modernization. Despite their efforts, the movement faced challenges due to Ethiopia's unique socio-political context and the deep-rooted traditionalism in rural communities. The failure to effectively integrate modern practices without disrupting cultural heritage led to limited acceptance of their proposals (Clarke, 2011).

Language Barriers. Education in Japan required proficiency in Japanese, a significant barrier for Ethiopian students. Unlike English, which was already being used in Ethiopia's emerging education system, Japanese was not widely taught or understood (Lee, 2017). In contrast, Ethiopia's education system has increasingly incorporated English as a medium of instruction, particularly in higher education. This shift has been associated with both opportunities and challenges. While English proficiency can enhance access to global knowledge, students' and teachers' lack of competence in the language of instruction has been linked to deteriorating quality of learning and teaching (Simie & McKinley, 2024). The disparity between the languages of instruction in Ethiopia and Japan poses a significant barrier for Ethiopian students. This linguistic challenge limited the number of Ethiopian students who could benefit from Japan's educational opportunities.

Limited Awareness of Japan's Modernization Model. While Kebede's work sought to popularize Japan's success story, awareness of Japan's modernization model remained limited among Ethiopia's broader population and policymakers. Many Ethiopians were more familiar with Western examples of development, particularly from Europe and the United States, which dominated the global discourse on modernization during the mid-20th century. The prevailing perception associated modernization with Westernization, leading to ambivalence towards adopting non-Western models like Japan's (Tamrat & Belay, 1998).

Economic Challenges

Financial Constraints. Ethiopia's financial limitations were perhaps the most significant obstacle to implementing Kebede's vision. Establishing modern educational institutions, investing in R&D, and sending students abroad required substantial financial resources, which were scarce in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's education sector faced challenges due to limited financial resources, affecting the country's ability to achieve its educational development goals (World Bank, 2005). In contrast, Japan's modernization during the Meiji era was supported by economic reforms and industrial growth, which provided the necessary funding for education and infrastructure development (JICA, 2019).

Dependence on Foreign Aid. Ethiopia's reliance on foreign aid for education and development projects often led to donor-driven priorities that did not align with Kebede's vision. For example, while some aid programs focused on basic education, Kebede

emphasized the need for higher education and technical training to drive modernization. This misalignment of priorities further constrained the implementation of his ideas. A study examining the influence of foreign donors on Ethiopia's higher education system highlights that while aid has supported the expansion of higher education, it has also introduced external priorities that may not always align with national development goals (Molla, 2019). This can result in tensions between donor agendas and local needs, particularly in the emphasis on quality and relevance of higher education to Ethiopia's socio-economic context (Hertaas, 2011).

Uneven Development Between Urban and Rural Areas. Kebede's vision required nationwide access to education and modernization efforts, but Ethiopia faced significant disparities between urban and rural areas. Rural regions, where the majority of the population resided, had limited access to schools, healthcare, and basic infrastructure (Arefaynie et al., 2024; Belay, 2020; World Bank, 2020). This uneven development made it difficult to implement Kebede's vision on a national scale.

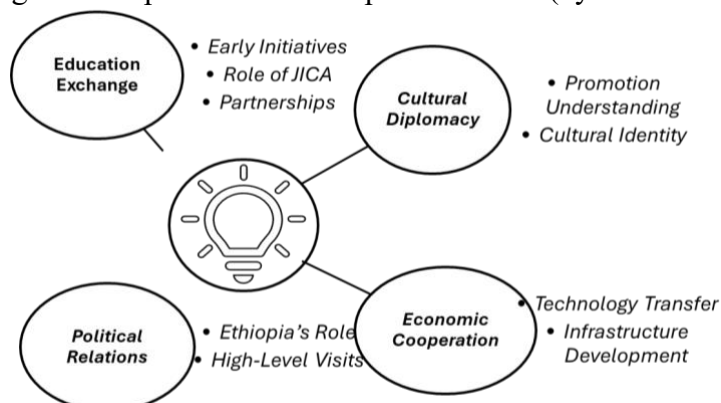
External Challenges

Limited International Support for Ethiopia-Japan Relations. While Kebede advocated for closer ties with Japan, the broader geopolitical context of the mid-20th century limited the scope of Ethiopia-Japan cooperation. Japan's focus during this period was on rebuilding its own economy and forging alliances with Western powers, which often left less room for fostering academic partnerships with African nations (Wikipedia, 2021). Additionally, Ethiopia's diplomatic efforts were more focused on relations with Western nations, further sidelining potential collaborations with Japan (Mehretu, 2014). Japan's engagement with Africa in the early 1960s was often mediated through collaboration with Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, rather than through direct bilateral relations with African nations (Ampiah, 2011).

Impact on Ethio-Japan Academic Relations

Kebede Michael's contributions had an enduring impact on the relationship between Ethiopia and Japan, particularly in the realm of academic and cultural cooperation. His writings and advocacy efforts inspired a generation of Ethiopian intellectuals and policymakers to view Japan as a model for development, modernization, and cultural resilience. This section examines the various ways Kebede's vision influenced Ethiopia-Japan relations, focusing on educational exchanges, cultural diplomacy, and long-term bilateral cooperation.

Figure 3: Impacts on Ethio-Japan Relations (by the authors)



Educational Exchanges

One of Kebede's most significant contributions was his emphasis on the importance of educational exchanges as a bridge between Ethiopia and Japan. By drawing attention to Japan's success in using education to drive modernization during the Meiji Restoration, Kebede underscored the value of sending Ethiopian students to Japan to gain technical knowledge and skills.

Early Educational Initiatives. Kebede's advocacy played a role in inspiring early educational exchanges between Ethiopia and Japan. Although these initiatives were limited in scale during Kebede's lifetime, they laid the groundwork for more formalized academic partnerships. For instance, Japan began to offer scholarships to Ethiopian students in the late 20th century, particularly through programs like the Monbukagakusho (MEXT) Scholarship (Embassy of Japan in Ethiopia, 2025). These programs provided Ethiopian students with opportunities to study in fields such as engineering, agriculture, and medicine—disciplines that Kebede identified as critical for Ethiopia's modernization (MEXT, 2024).

The Role of JICA in Expanding Exchanges. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has been a key player in advancing the educational cooperation envisioned by Kebede. JICA's initiatives have focused on building Ethiopia's technical and vocational education capacity, aligning with Kebede's emphasis on practical education. For instance, the "Technical and Vocational Education and Training Support Project" (TVET) was established to enhance the quality and relevance of vocational training in Ethiopia. This project aimed to strengthen the capacities of trainers involved in vocational and technical training, thereby boosting technological development and productivity in the country (JICA, 2007). Programs such as the African Business Education (ABE) Initiative for Youth have facilitated academic exchanges, allowing Ethiopian students to pursue graduate studies in Japanese universities while participating in internships with Japanese companies. These exchanges not only enhance the technical skills of Ethiopian students but also promote cross-cultural understanding (JICA, 2023).

Educational Partnerships. Today, Ethiopian universities maintain active partnerships with Japanese institutions, reflecting Kebede's vision of sustained academic collaboration. For example, Addis Ababa University has established joint research projects with Japanese universities such as Kyoto University and the University of Tokyo. These collaborations focus on areas like disaster management (Addis Ababa Institute of Technology, 2024), agricultural innovation (JST, 2020), and public health, leveraging Japanese expertise to address Ethiopia's development challenges. As a case study of cooperation, Tokushima University is active in hosting graduate students and scholars from Ethiopia (Tokushima University, 2019), expanding academic agreements with Ethiopian universities such as Gondar University, conducting joint research in Ethiopia (Amare et al., 2012; Kassu et al., 2007, 2008) as well as activating the alumni network in Ethiopia for future initiatives.

Cultural Diplomacy

Kebede's writings emphasized the importance of cultural exchange as a means of fostering mutual respect and understanding between Ethiopia and Japan. He admired Japan's ability to modernize without compromising its cultural heritage and saw this as a model for Ethiopia to emulate. This perspective has influenced Ethiopia-Japan relations by highlighting the role of culture in strengthening bilateral ties.

Promotion of Mutual Understanding. Kebede's work contributed to the promotion of mutual understanding between Ethiopians and Japanese people. His writings introduced Ethiopian readers to Japan's history, culture, and development strategies, fostering an appreciation for Japan's unique approach to modernization (Felleke, 2006). Similarly, Japan's cultural diplomacy efforts in Ethiopia, such as Japanese language programs and cultural festivals (Embassy of Japan in Ethiopia, 2013; MOFA, 2019), have enhanced Ethiopian awareness of Japanese traditions and values.

Preservation of Cultural Identity. Kebede's vision of modernization emphasized the need to preserve Ethiopia's cultural identity, a theme that resonates in Ethiopia-Japan cultural exchanges. Japanese institutions, such as the Japan Foundation, have supported initiatives that celebrate Ethiopia's cultural heritage while promoting cross-cultural dialogue (Japan Foundation, 2024). For example, collaborative art exhibitions and music festivals have showcased the rich traditions of both nations, strengthening their cultural ties (UNESCO, 2024).

Economic and Technological Cooperation

While Kebede's primary focus was on education and culture, his vision has also influenced economic and technological cooperation between Ethiopia and Japan. He identified technology transfer as a critical component of modernization, and this idea has been reflected in various bilateral projects.

Technology Transfer Through Education. Educational exchanges between Ethiopia and Japan have facilitated the transfer of technology and expertise. Ethiopian students trained in Japanese universities often return to their home country with advanced knowledge in fields such as renewable energy (Northwestern University, 2021), infrastructure development, and information technology. Knowledge Co-Creation programs cover a wide range of professional fields, including education, health, infrastructure, energy, trade, and finance (JICA, 2024). These contributions align with Kebede's belief in the transformative power of education.

Infrastructure Development. Japan's commitment to Ethiopia's development is evident in its support for major infrastructure projects, such as the construction of roads, bridges, and industrial facilities (Fanabc, 2020; Reuters, 2024). While these initiatives are not directly linked to Kebede's vision, they reflect the broader influence of Ethio-Japan relations shaped by the intellectual groundwork he laid.

Political and Diplomatic Relations

Kebede's vision also contributed to strengthening political and diplomatic ties between Ethiopia and Japan. His work encouraged Ethiopian policymakers to view Japan as a strategic partner in development, fostering a bilateral relationship that extends beyond education and culture.

Ethiopia's Role in Japan's Africa Policy. Ethiopia has played a prominent role in Japan's Africa policy, particularly through platforms like the Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) (JapanGov, 2016). Kebede's emphasis on Ethiopia-Japan cooperation laid the intellectual foundation for Ethiopia's active participation in TICAD, which promotes sustainable development across the African continent.

High-Level Visits and Diplomacy. Ethiopia and Japan established diplomatic relations in 1930, further solidified with the establishment of embassies in both countries' capitals by 1958 (Capital, 2023). The enduring legacy of Kebede's vision is evident in the high-level visits and diplomatic engagements between Ethiopia and Japan. The then Crown Prince and Princess of Japan visited Ethiopia, marking a significant milestone in diplomatic relations. Ethiopian Prime Ministers have frequently visited Japan to strengthen bilateral ties. For instance, during a visit, discussions emphasized Japan's support in sectors such as agriculture, rural development, infrastructure, and education in Ethiopia (MOFA, 2014).

Conclusion

Kebede Michael's work "'Japan Indemin Seletenech'" serves as a testament to the power of intellectual diplomacy in shaping international academic relations. His advocacy for Ethio-Japanese cooperation in education and cultural exchange has left a lasting legacy, influencing current initiatives in research, student exchange, and capacity building. By critically examining his contributions, this review underscores the importance of leveraging education as a bridge between nations and offers insights for strengthening future partnerships. While Kebede's vision has had a significant impact, its full realization has faced challenges, including resource constraints, limited institutional capacity, and geopolitical factors. However, opportunities for furthering Ethiopia-Japan relations remain abundant.

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