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**Review**

Diana Spencer, *The Woman from Tedbab*

Aethiopica 10 (2007), 291–292

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg
Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik
Reviews


The first author of the early modern period to write of travels in highland Christian Ethiopia was Father Francisco Alvares, priest of the Roman Church and member of the official Portuguese delegation to the royal court of highland Christian Ethiopia between 1520 and 1526. His writings include observations about the land and people, the churches and monasteries as well as the royal court and its customs. The Scotsman James Bruce, who came to the northern Ethiopian highlands in his quest for the source of the Nile, visited the royal capital of Gondăr between the years 1769 and 1771. Bruce published descriptions of the land, peoples, and the royal court which rise above the level of reportage produced by Jesuit visitors to Ethiopia of the 17th and early 18th centuries and which were not surpassed by European visitors to Ethiopia in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Diane Spencer figuratively follows the footsteps of Alvares and Bruce, although her book *Woman from Tedbab* differs from earlier accounts in its focus. Rather top-down descriptions focused upon ruling elites, her extensive travels into remote areas of northern Ethiopia led to numerous encounters with the rural peasantry, accounts of which enrich her descriptions of rural life during the last years of Emperor Ḥaylā Šallase’s reign. Spencer had come to live in Addis Abāba when her husband received an appointment in Addis Abāba at an agency of the United Nations. Her first attempt at exploring
remote areas of northern Ethiopia, accessible only by mule or on foot, in order “to know what it felt like to live under those conditions”, ended in frustration. However, not until she was enlisted as member of a volunteer research team by Addis Ababa University to record and photograph historic religious art treasures, did her travel expeditions, over 20 in number, become missions supported by official letters of introduction by the university. The experience of participating in the monastic way of life, its liturgy and rituals during the course of her travel missions led to her study of Gǝǝz (she had already acquired some fluency in Amharic), and to an investigation of its theology. Although she received permits from the Crown Prince that provided her with a royal riding mule and an escort, Spencer’s encounters during her many expeditions were primarily with the rural farming peasantry and with priests and monks at the churches and monasteries that she visited.

Indeed, the title of her book, *The Woman from Tedbab*, was inspired by ties of friendship between Spencer and the people of Tedbab, a flat-topped mountain and site of an ancient monastery and church known as Tǝďbǝbǝ Maryam. Spencer describes her visits to ancient churches and monasteries that possessed relatively unknown manuscripts and icons, with a focus upon the ancient churches of Gǝǝz Maryam and Ahya Fagg Qǝqqǝsam as well as Tǝďbǝbǝ Maryam. Her vivid and sympathetic descriptions, ranging from accounts of religious beliefs and rural folkways to the ceremony of revelation of the holy icon of the Virgin Mary at Tǝďbǝbǝ Maryam, an icon said to have been painted by St. Luke the Evangelist, make this gracefully-written book, illustrated with color photographs, an important contribution to the literature of highland Christian Ethiopia.

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Wie der Verfasser in den dem Inhaltsverzeichnis vorangestellten Erläuterungen zur Umschrift von Vokabeln, Eigennamen und Akronymen (S. 8) zur Feststellung gelangt, dass “Tigrinya nicht immer eindeutig standardisiert ist”