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Review

BAHRU ZEWDE, *A Short History of Ethiopia and the Horn*

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Reviews

Der Band ist außerordentlich informativ. Der wissenschaftliche Ertrag der Papiere ist wegen seiner materialintensiven Darstellung vielleicht noch höher zu bewerten, als es mitunter während der Konferenz selbst den Anschein hatte, wo sich gelegentlich — durchaus verständlich — die tagespolitische Bewertung stärker in den Mittelpunkt drängte, als dies einem historisch-wissenschaftlichen Diskurs üblicherweise dienlich sein dürfte.


Siegbert Uhlig


In view of some recent radical changes in the academic interpretation of Ethiopian history, in particular at the University of Addis Ababa, the first textbook on this subject to be produced by the University itself may give rise to a certain amount of anticipation and curiosity. It is a 244-page volume, produced in a comparatively simple printing technique, with 46 illustrations and 8 fairly small maps.

As in the case of former — but not printed — material for the students of the history department, the method of collective authorship has been chosen. Basing his work on the results of a workshop which took place in 1995 and treated former student materials with detailed criticism, BAHRU ZEWDE has rewritten those texts and partly amplified them. The conclusive chapter on the rise and fall of the Derg was composed by the compiler himself. The book has already aroused the attention of the public in Addis Ababa outside the university campus of Sodast Kilo. Because of its relatively low price and its handbook character it could become the work from which the upcoming generation will mainly draw their knowledge of history.
In 17 chapters the authors provide a summary of the history of the Ethiopian region which extends from methodical explanations (Chapter 1), elaborations on geography and palaeoanthropology, the formation of class and state structures, distribution of land and religion (Chapters 2 to 5) to the chronological depiction of the mainly political, but also economical developments of the region from the ancient world up to modern times (1991) (Chapters 6 to 17). Each chapter ends with a concise list of most important works on the topic, and almost each chapter is followed by extracts from sources (in English or Amharic). At the end there is an eight-page index with around 500 personal names, place names, indications of individual events (such as famines or Ethio-US Treaty of 1953) and some names of institutions. The index is detailed and therefore very useful. The fields of knowledge and eras touched upon in this book are presented concisely and cover a vast wealth of facts reflecting the richness of Ethiopian history. The authors document the whole range of Ethiopian historical studies briefly, precisely and yet in extraordinary detail.

The volume will provide many students with basic patterns of knowledge and interpretation of history, therefore it is perhaps useful to discuss two aspects, which could be seen as partly problematic. First, naming always tends to be a problem in “multicultural” contexts — as in Ethiopia. The current burning discussion on the status of the individual ethnic groups in Ethiopia, however, is not always taken into consideration in this respect — often the Amharic version of peoples’ or settlement’s names is used; criticisms, resulting from current ethnically motivated tensions, could have easily been avoided by stating that these choices were only for the sake of simplicity, to be easily understood by everyone, but wouldn’t mean any prejudgement. For example, the authors have refrained from using place names in modern Oromo spelling (‘Bali’ instead of ‘Baalee’, p. 63); the town of ‘Adaama’ is not mentioned under its official name (p. 163: ‘Nazareth’). Similarly, the ‘Anywa’ are designated with the name ‘Anuak’, which is unpopular with them (p. 123). The problem, however, is not ignored; e.g. the presently largely preferred terms ‘Berta’ (p. 122) instead of ‘Beni Shangul’, and ‘Tegray’ instead of ‘Tegre’ (p. 63) are used, but not consistently (map p. 118: ‘Tegre’ instead of ‘Tegray’, ‘Arqi’ instead of ‘Her-gigo’, ‘Naqamte’ instead of ‘Leqemt’).

There are also some other minor, unproblematic formal inconsistencies which can easily happen, as in the (abridged) transliteration1. Additionally it can be mentioned here that in a few cases, presumably due to the pressure of having to

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get the work finished [seemingly unavoidable in any book!], there are minor gaps in acknowledgements\(^2\) and some few cases of conceptual unclarity\(^3\). The — extremely helpful — explanatory source texts are not always printed in the original language, once even in the translation of a translation, which proves to be problematic as far as methodology is concerned\(^4\).

The second aspect concerns the geo-political scope of the book, which is somehow unclear. This is apparent in the maps. The first (p. 9 “Physical map of Ethiopia and the Horn”) shows present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibuti; Somalia, part of the “Horn”, is missing. The 19\(^{th}\) century maps show Ethiopia’s borders as they were in the period before 1991/93, including Eritrea (p. 118, 159), although these borders were not established\(^5\) until the early 20\(^{th}\) century, and Eritrea with its modern borders has only become part of Ethiopia in 1952 (respectively 1962). In all five political maps borders of the periods concerned are missing, although these are of vital importance to understand the political scene at that time. It is interesting to note that the title of the book itself seems to reflect some open discussions concerning its scope. One can get the impression that the book was originally intended to be entitled “A Short History of Ethiopia” only, but later “and the Horn” was added in smaller letters\(^6\). The reason is clear — the perspective was to include more than the present state of Ethiopia if it was to be portrayed in a true historical sense. Thus “the Horn” was added, but the book remained mainly a history of Ethiopia, and partly of Eritrea.

Eritrea’s role in Ethiopian history appears in a contradictory way. On page 201 it is stated that “Eritrea ... was part of the Ethiopian empire before ... 1890”, in contradiction to Aṣe Yǒhannas’ letter of 1881 (p. 145), in which he

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2 Not all sources of the very informative illustrations are stated: p. 135 Portrait of Aṣe Tewodros (Illus. 12.1), p. 142 bird’s eye view of the countryside around ‘Adwa (Illus. 12.4), p. 154 a very interesting picture of Manilik’s Army on the march (Illus. 13.1).

3 The “modern Homo Sapiens” is incorrectly described as “very similar to today’s humans” (p 15); but from the biological point of view he is identical.

4 Cf. the text “The Battle of Shembra Kure”, p. 88f, an Amharic translation from the French version of the Arabic original.

5 The establishment of borders is described at the end of the chapter “The Post-Adwa Equilibrium” (p. 143f); for the sake of completeness it might be added here that Eritrea’s borders were not only stipulated in the contract of 1900, but further in 1906 and 1908. See: Ḥabtu Ghebre-Ab, Ḫethiopia and Eritrea. A Documentary Study. Trenton 1993.

6 Not to be blamed of speculation I can e.g. refer to a minor grammatical error, which may show, that at least in some texts the word “Ethiopia” has been replaced by “Ethiopia and the Horn” only later (p. 96: “Ethiopia and the Horn has hosted considerable advances in the arts ...” instead of “have”).
A review of the book "Ethiopia" by [Author]. The book is described as important with a dynamic development of Ethiopian territories. Critics note that continuity is presupposed where it exists to a limited extent only. The name "Ethiopia" itself changed its scope considerably throughout history. The book provides valuable information on the period between the Ahmad Grañ wars and the expulsion of the Jesuits in the 16th to 17th centuries. The text also provides an overview of the years between the revolutionary movements of 1974 and the fall of the Mängstu regime in 1991. The introductory remarks on historiography are also discussed.

7 Without mention of date; possibly by King Sembruthes in the early 5th century. See ENNO LITTMANN, Deutsche Aksum-Expedition, Vol 1: Reisebericht der Expedition. Topographie und Geschichte Aksums, Berlin 1913, p. 42f.

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crucial importance for the student. The comments on the ideological usability of historiography can sensibilize the student to see how important it is to deal with contradictions between different sources, all of them being results of different points of view — in both senses of the term: in respect to what had been conceived to be true and what had been perceived to be true.

On the whole it is a book, which, with its impressive wealth of data and other materials in such a restricted space, is suitable to make the student aware of the great diversity of Ethiopian history. It gives a new response to the interest traditionally enjoyed by history in Ethiopia.

Wolbert G.C. Smidt


Durch das ganze Buch hindurch ist die Freude des 90-jährigen Autors am Erzählen deutlich zu spüren, der dem Leser das im Volksgläuben verankerte Vertrauen der Äthiopischen Christen, das diese dem jeweiligen Heiligen entgegenbringen, vermitteln möchte. In der Einführung (S. 9–22) geht der Verf. zunächst auf die Art der in Äthiopien praktizierten Heiligenverehrung ein, wie er es selbst auf vielen seiner Reisen beobachten konnte. Außerdem gibt er einen kurzen Einblick in die Literaturgattung der Hagiographie: die Gādl genannte Vita einer Person mit den Topoi, wie Kidan, Ta’amor und Mâlk’s, die erforderlich sind, um sich von einer weltlichen Biographie abzugrenzen.