Review

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ESTELLE SOHIER, Le roi des rois et la photographie. Politique de l’image et pouvoir royal en Éthiopie sous le règne de Ménélîk II

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Reviews

Šomázana, in ‘Akkälä Güzay (Eritrea). In the praise to God, after the “Miracle of the tree”, the words nasēbbôhô ‘ozgi’âboher sôbbuh zâ-tâsabbôha ... (§ 201) is the initial line from the (First) Prayer of Moses (Ex. 15:1), from the “Songs of the Prophets” in the Ethiopic Psalter. The edition indicates rhyming only for § 160; however, the hagiographer stylistically emphasized also some other passages, rhyming a few lines elsewhere, s. e.g., § 51, ll. 22–26 (rhyme on -tu) § 72, ll. 7–10 (rhyme on -ra), almost entire § 80 (rhyme on -hu); § 89, ll. 5–9 (rhyme on -wa).

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At the end of the 19th and early 20th century, photos taken in Africa by Europeans did not only reflect their colonial desires or only their wish to promote a European look at peoples which they considered as inferiors. Photos were also used by some African rulers as instruments to promote their own power and legitimacy. After the introduction of photography at the Ethiopian courts during the 1880s, Ethiopian rulers quickly understood the political functions of photos and the advantages of using them. At first, these documents permitted them to promote their power throughout the country and to counter political claims of local lords. For example, a photo of the king, staged in majesty with all political and ideological signs and symbols was a powerful mean, easily printed, to convince the population that the royal power is not vacant and kept by powerful and legitimate people, particularly when the king was sick or even dead. But these images allowed them also to promote their country outside Ethiopia, particularly in Europe. By permitting Europeans to take photos of Ethiopian leaders and by allowing them to publish these images in European newspapers, the Ethiopian royal power could promote and insure its independence.

Divided in nine chapters (gathered in four parts), the book of Dr. Estelle Sohier (University of Geneva) perfectly highlights these two aspects of the use of photos by the Ethiopian rulers at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Her study focuses on the political use of images by the aristocracy of Säwa. The historical period studied here is not only Manilk II’s reign time as king of kings (1889–1913), contrary to what the title suggests. The author studied a longer period, from Yohannas IV’s reign (1872–89) to the coronation of Ḥaylā Sollase I (1930). In fact, this choice is particularly wise
because the establishment of a propaganda including photos really started with Menilik's claims over Ethiopian throne while he was king of Šàwa (1866–89). Such policy was improved during his reign as king of kings but it continued after his death (in 1913). The aristocracy of Šàwa used photos and images as instruments to legitimize the position of Zàwditu as queen of queens and of ras Tafäri Mäk'ännän as regent. The author collected an impressive amount of documents and information from European and Ethiopian collections of photos. Nevertheless, the study does not deal only with photos but with different types of images like paintings, seals, coins, stamps and post-cards. This is particularly interesting and it really improved our understanding about the phenomenon. The use of photos cannot be understood actually without notions concerning the preparation and the use of images in Ethiopian political context and the author did not miss the chance to explain it clearly.

In two particularly well done chapters (chapters 1 and 2), the author explains how the Ethiopian aristocracy adopted photography and its codes, and how photos showing Ethiopian rulers from these times reflected “staging” elaborated by Ethiopians themselves. This part is followed by three chapters, maybe less remarkable but still interesting, which confirm the opinion of Donald Crummey concerning the neo-Solomonic ideology but in the iconographic world. Indeed, chapters 3, 4 and 5 show us that at Menilik’s court a new iconographic apparatus was developed, which included old historical and mythological themes. In presenting references to king Salomon or to the mythic foundation of Ethiopian dynasty, and in introducing symbols like the lion of Juda, different types of images (paintings, seals and photos) produced by the royal court aimed at promoting and insuring Menilik’s power over Ethiopia. In chapters 6 and 7 the author explains how photos and other types of images commissioned by Ethiopian rulers participated in the foreign policy which aimed at guaranteeing the independence of the country from colonial power. Obviously, these chapters represent the best part of the book. Ethiopian rulers understood the crucial political role of photos published by newspapers in European countries. And finally, they used photos commissioned by them to promote their country in Europe. Thanks to this policy, the Ethiopian state could be perceived step by step by the European public as a real political entity, as a state with all characteristics familiar to European eyes. In fact, as the author says, if European government could easily convince European people of the need to submit “barbarian peoples”, described definitively as strangers to “civilization”, it is more difficult to convince them of the need to submit a country which they saw as familiar. The book ends with two chapters (chapters 8 and 9) which highlight the political use of images during the period after the death of Menilik and during the reign of queen Zàwditu. The aim of the iconographic policy of aristocracy of Šàwa was at that time to
convince Ethiopian population that royal power was still strong and still in
the hands of legitimate rulers. Even if the Sawa rulers had deposed lalach Iyasu,
the heir to Manilik, in 1916, they continued to promote Manilik’s memory all
over the country. Through the production of images, they definitively confiscat-
ed Manilik’s heritage and presented Zawditu and Tafari Mak*arnan as the
real heirs of this heritage.

So Estelle Sohier’s book contributes actively to our understanding of the
political role of iconographic production in contemporary Ethiopia. The
author rigorously studied a large amount of sources and her book highlights
an important phenomenon. Besides, the presence of a good glossary of
Ethiopian terms, illustrations throughout the text with details on their
provenance, and an index make this book particularly pleasant to read.
Some minor points for correction and addition may be pointed out but the
main lack of this study is that the author does not propose any comparison
with other extra-European countries. For example, it should have been in-
teresting to compare the Ethiopian situation with Merina kingdom’s one.
And is it possible to present the Mahdist state in Sudan as the exact opposite
situation of Ethiopia in the eyes of Europeans? But this lack of comparison
does not depreciate the high scientific value of the book.

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HANNA RUBINKOWSKA, Ethiopia on the Verge of Modernity: the
Transfer of Power during Zewditu’s Reign 1916–1930, Warsaw: Agade,
The reigns of lalach Iyasu and Zawditu, sandwiched between those of Manilik II
and Hayl* Sallase I and separated by the 1916 coup d’etat, remain an awkward
and interstitial period in modern Ethiopian history, of which a definitive ac-
count has yet to be given. Not only are historians drawn to the preceding and
succeeding reigns, each of which can be fitted into a narrative of a kind that is
hard to devise for the interregnum, but the understanding of the whole period
is affected by an ahistorical awareness of what came after it. This book repre-
sents a heroic but sadly only partially successful attempt to remedy the defi-
cency.

Part of the problem rests with the sources. Rubinkowska has an admirable
grasp of the available published Amharic language sources, including notably
the works of Gabra Sallase, Mah*tam* Sallase Wald* Masqal, Marso’e Hazan
Wald* Qirqos, Takla-Sadoq Mak*ariya, Yared Gabra Mika’el, and indeed
tafari Mak*arnan (as he then was) himself, and has trawled through the ar-
chives of the British Foreign Office, though other external diplomatic records