SUSANNE EPPLE, Addis Ababa University

Review

DIRK BUSTORF, Lebendige Überlieferung: Geschichte und Erinnerung der muslimischen Silt‘e Äthiopiens. With an English Summary

Aethiopica 17 (2014), 288–291
ISSN: 2194–4024

Edited in the Asien-Afrika-Institut
Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik
der Universität Hamburg
Abteilung für Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

by Alessandro Bausi

in cooperation with

Bairu Tafta, Ulrich Braukämper, Ludwig Gerhardt,
Hilke Meyer-Bahlburg and Siegbert Uhlig
Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume


**CSCO** Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, 1903ff.

**EFAH** Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Orient-Abteilung, Epigraphische For- schungen auf der Arabischen Halbinsel, herausgegeben im Auftrag des Instituts von NORTBERT NEBES.

**EMML** Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.


**JSS** *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Manchester 1956ff.

**NEASt** *Northeast African Studies*, East Lansing, MI 1979ff.

**OrChr** *Oriens Christianus*, Leipzig – Roma – Wiesbaden 1901ff.

**OrChrP** *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, Roma 1935ff.


**PO** Patrologia Orientalis, 193ff.


**SÁe** Scriptores Aethiopici.


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Until recently, the ethnic formation recognized as Salṭe (Silt‘e) today was known as Salṭe, Salṭi, Hadiyya, Adāre, Islam, East Gurage, both locally and also in the existing literature. Their language was classified as Eastern Gurage. Their common name Salṭe was only officially determined in the 1990s. On the basis of cultural and linguistic similarity, the Salṭe were long considered as a branch of the Gurage people and their population (about 700,000 in 2007) was separately administered in different zones, e.g. those of Gurage, Hadiyya and Allaabä. When their quest for independence was finally granted in 2001, they were recognized as an independent political entity and granted their own administrative zone.

Bustorf’s research enlightens how the Salṭe perceive themselves today, and how their self-image firmly stands on their contemporary memories of their origin and history: today’s “Salṭe identity” is based on the shared idea of a common historical unity and a uniqueness of the people that is claimed to have existed for a long period of time.

During past regimes, governance in Ethiopia was highly centralized and ethnic, religious and other differences between the various groups were rather downplayed. After the downfall of the socialist Dārg regime in 1991, Ethiopia had not only been decentralized and reorganized along ethnic, linguistic and historical lines; all ethnic groups regardless of their size were granted equality by the new Ethiopian constitution of 1995. One consequence of the mainly ethnic based federalism has been the re-emergence and creation of ethnic identities: as being acknowledged as a distinctive ethnic group brings advantages in political participation, formerly suppressed or ignored groups have been claiming independent existence. As a result, the official number of ethnic groups in Ethiopia has increased. In the ethnically very diverse Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples’ Region (SNNPR), for example, the number increased from 45 to 56. The Salṭe are one of these newly acknowledged ethnic groups. Their case is prominently known in Ethiopia and the story of their successful struggle for administrative independence has been described by different scholars. However, no


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one has studied the contribution of their history and memory to the formation of the Šlête as an independent ethnic group in such detail as Dirk Bustorf.

Bustorf’s analysis of Šlête history goes along two lines: on the one hand he was interested in the reconstruction of their history through comparing the content of their own historical knowledge with other historical sources. On the other hand, he looked at the structures of Šlête historical knowledge which were instrumental for creating an ethnic identity.

The book begins with a general introduction of Šlête ethnography and an outline of the author’s theoretical orientation. The author draws on the concepts of historical consciousness and social or cultural memory in order to look at Šlête history as a “construction of meaning by referring to the past which serves the present and prepares for the future” (p. 462). Specifically, he looks at the variations of historical discourses of different sections or, as he calls it, sub-units of Šlête society and how they have led to a common identity.

Chapters 3 to 7 constitute the core of the book in which Bustorf describes Šlête history. He starts each chapter with a “historical overview” in which he outlines the basic facts of a specific period or on a specific topic, and then continues describing the events from Šlête perspective. He begins with the Šlête legends of origin which describe that in the 16th century the Muslim ancestors of the Šlête migrated from the eastern highlands, crossed the African Rift Valley and finally reached the Gurage Mountains. Bustorf explains that all Šlête claim to have common Arab ancestors even though there exist variations of historical narratives collected from the six different Šlête subgroups of which his informants were aware of. The author could also prove the inconsistencies through an analysis of individual genealogies.

Next, he describes the different migrations within the wider area that took place between the 16th and 18th centuries and became more intense in the 19th century, which was also characterized by many conflicts with neighbouring groups at the same time. In Chapter 5 he discusses the conquest of the South by Emperor Manilk II which led, on the long run, to a revival and proliferation of Islam, as is demonstrated in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 describes how Šlête land became established within the Ethiopian state and ends with the Italian occupation in 1940. Bustorf leaves out the period between the end of the Italian occupation and the period under the socialist Dârg regime, arguing that a satisfactory study of this close past would have needed a different methodological approach than he has chosen, e.g. a close look at and an analysis of the written documents of that time as well as a selection of different informants.

Thus the last chapter of the book jumps to the end of the socialist Dârg regime in 1991. Along with the change in government, began the “Šlête movement”, e.g. the time when the Šlête started claiming their independent
ethnic identity. Here, the author analyzes the basic structures of Solté memories and explains, that their memories revolve around specifically remembered personalities identity and historical consciousness.

The book is an impressive work of more than 350 pages text written in German language. Besides the very details descriptions, the book also contains several appendices. These include a glossary (explaining Arabic, Amharic, Oromo, Gurage, Solté and few Hadiyya terms), several graphic charts (demonstrating the social structure of Solté society, their migratory movements and several genealogical clusters of key figures of Solté history), an example of how Bustorf developed local genealogies, as well as nine maps (showing the migratory routes of expanding Solté, locations of settlements and conflict). There is an elaborate index and at the end of the book one finds a well written English summary which makes the results of Bustorf’s at least to some extent accessible to non-German readers.

In the introduction it is explained that the data on which the book is based stem from eight months fieldwork among the Solté, and also from results and inspirations of previous visits of the author to the Hadiyya. Bustorf never stayed long in one area, he rather travelled from place to place and collected and compared historical accounts of different knowledgeable Solté elders from different places and villages in Solté land. It was necessary, he explains, to cover all parts of Solté as the knowledge of many informants was limited to their own region or village. This meant that Bustorf had to put together the different fragments of Solté remembered history himself.

The book also has a list of informants which has been included in a section “oral sources and bibliography” (pp. 363–369). Here, the author gives some basic information about the 200 informants that he interviewed. The representation of the informants and the list in the appendix are maybe the only parts of the book where the reader is more confused than enlightened. In the main text, informants are indicated only through an abbreviated code which one can look up in the section called “Interviewpartner”. Here one finds information about name, age, and social status of each informant. Besides, the social status of the informants (here called “title” referring to religious or political functions of the informant) is indicated in Solté or other languages, so that the reader has to go to the glossary to find out whether an informant was a religious expert, military leader or local administrator. This makes it very difficult and tedious for the reader to understand the social background of an informant, and thus the context of a given information or narrative. Also, while the author explained his methods and experiences in the field very well, he did not introduce the background of his assistants and translators, though they accompanied him throughout his research and possibly influenced the course of the research.
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Overall the book is very well readable and an excellent example of how Ethnography and History can be combined. I hope that it will be translated into English in the future to make it accessible to non-German speaking readership as well, especially Ethiopians and most importantly to the Sôte themselves. Besides those readers interested in history and identity of the Sôte people, the book is generally relevant to scholars interested in the complex processes involved in identity formation – a phenomenon that can be observed in many parts of contemporary Ethiopia.

Susanne Epple, Addis Ababa University


The Maale, as Sophie Thubauville’s remarks in her contribution, next to other south Ethiopian ethnic groups, have already been studied by a number of anthropologists. Thubauville, however, chooses a different focus for her research – the life circles and life histories of women in Maale – following the trend that emphasizes gender related subjects in Ethiopian studies.¹

The Introduction gives an overview on former anthropological research and a short historical outline of women and gender studies in Anthropology.

Chapter 2 starts with a personal account on how the author was introduced to the field and got accustomed to Maale culture during her long stays in the field.

It also mentions the methodological approach, which is in line with other researches of the Mainzer anthropological school² and relies on all the basic