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Review of

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(Ethiopia), 1898–1991*

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TSEGA ENDALEW ETEFA, *Inter-Ethnic Relations on a Frontier: Mätäkkäl (Ethiopia), 1898–1991* = Aethiopistische Forschungen 69. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006. pp. 186 text and bibliography, 187–195 appendices. Price: € 68,-. ISBN: 3-447-05442-5

Mätäkkäl, Tsega Endalew's study area, is one of the three zones of the Beni Šangul–Gumuz National Regional State located along the north-western frontier between Ethiopia and the Sudan and occupies an estimated total area of 22,028 km². The area is inhabited by mixed ethnic groups of Gumuz, Šinaša, Oromo, Agäw, and Amhara. The Gumuz constitute the most numerous ethnic group of the area. This study, conducted in what is a scientifically less explored, investigated and documented area, provides a comprehensive historical and socio-cultural account of the peoples and cultures of the Ethio–Sudan frontier area. It is based on empirical field research and an extensive review of material in the libraries of Addis Ababa and Hamburg Universities together with the Durham Archives (England) as is fully described in chapter one.

In chapter two, the author delineates the ethnic identities and settlement patterns of the different ethnic groups peopling the region focusing on the Gumuz, Šinaša, Agäw and Oromo.

In chapter three, the author deals with the historical aspects of the frontier and its relation to the centre emphasizing the 'dilemmas of rule'. As a social anthropologist who lived and conducted an extended period of field research in the area for over a decade, I strongly underscore Tsega Endalew's research findings as offering deep historical insight into the peoples and cultures of the frontier area substantially bridging the gaps in the available scientifically researched information. The study benefits from an extensive review of secondary sources, most importantly the 'Sudan Intelligence Reports' in the Durham Archives, England. The historical account tries to co-ordinate the centuries of expeditions undertaken in the area and the late incorporation of the frontier (16th–19th centuries); the history of the frontier during the Turco–Egyptian rule of the Sudan (1821–1885); the relations between the Mahdist in the Sudan and Ethiopia (1885–1898); the historical profiles of the frontier areas 'north of Abbay' such as Mätäkkäl, Čälga and Mätämma as well as 'south of Abbay' such as Sheikdom of Beni-Šangul and others; the historical profile of the frontier area after the battle of Mätämma and the death of Emperor Yoħannəs; local resistance and incorporation; and finally Mätäkkäl's incorporation from a 'no-man's land' into Ethiopian territory. The historical explanations offer important accounts of the peoples and cultures of the frontier since the 17th century up to the overthrow of the *Därg* regime and the beginning of the EPRDF regime in 1991.

Following the review of historical accounts, the author examines comprehensively the intra- and inter-ethnic relations and integration within and among the different ethnic groups inhabiting the area. The historical and socio-cultural significance of trade (e.g. coffee, gold, rifles, honey and wax, salt, mules, horses, slaves, ivory, and civet) along the trans-frontier and trans-Abbay routes is considered as a major important linking factor among the different frontier ethnic groups. The widespread problem affecting trade and communications is described in detail as attributable to the 'brigands/šəftas' and 'robbers' in the so called 'no-man's' land. After highlighting the trade links from a historical perspective, the author examines the intra-ethnic relations with special focus on intra-Oromo (on both sides of the Abbay), intra-Šinaša (ties of the group members in different *wärada* of the area and beyond), intra-Gumuz (citing inter-clan relations), intra-Agäw, and intra-Amhara relations. The mainly historical overview of intra-ethnic relations is followed by an extensive socio-cultural description in chapter four explaining the dynamism of inter-ethnic relations and integration. The latter examines differentiating links between the different ethnic groups such as: Gumuz-Oromo; Gumuz-Šinaša; Gumuz-Agäw; Agäw-Šinaša; and Oromo-Agäw relations. Also delineated are important traditional social and institutional arrangements that served as corollaries of ethnic relations such as inter-marriages, belief systems and ritual practices, and community service organizations.

In chapter five, the study provides an in-depth account of the causes of ethnic conflicts as well as traditional community-based mechanisms of mutual tolerance, peace building and conflict resolution. For instance, valuing virginity in relation to 'sister-exchange marriage', abducting girls, adultery, belief in evil-eye, fame killings, and encroachment on land resources are noted as causes of conflict among the Gumuz. Traditional institutional arrangements such as *Siyaha* and *Mangama* institutions are noted as the best mechanisms for conflict resolution among the Gumuz. The traditional *Michun* and *Harma Hodha* institutions among the Oromo, Šinaša, Gumuz, and Agäw are cited as most important traditional strategic alliance institutions, which build mutual trust and tolerance among the different ethnic groups. Finally, the author presents an interesting comparison of cases of traditional institutional arrangements concerning ethnic conflicts in other parts of Ethiopia plus in some parts of Africa, suggesting the traditional conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms as best and most appropriate solutions for managing conflicts in Ethiopia and the African continent at large. The findings of this extensively stimulating study are summed up and concluded in chapter six.

Despite the preceding notable outcome based on the author's painstaking research, a few of the study findings require revisiting lest the plausibility of the findings be undermined:

1. Generalized statements about the extent of self-sufficiency of the Gumuz and the Šinaša (cf. pp. 32–33) are hardly plausible given the true empirical realities of the Gumuz in the field. The attribution of the lack of self-sufficiency of the Gumuz to their ‘backward material culture’ (p. 32) is unfair and distorts the facts because (a) the very use of the term ‘backward’ implies unsubstantiated subjective judgement, which reinforces age-old inferior attitudes towards the group and their spiritual and material culture; (b) Thorough socio-anthropological studies have revealed and witnessed the fact that except for their marginalization and segregation to the peripheries, the Gumuz are relatively self-sufficient based on their traditional production strategies of shifting cultivation and the accompanying multi-niche strategies of gathering, hunting, fishing, honey collection, gold-panning and trading. The notion of ‘chronic food insecurity’ cannot be verified by valid nutritional measurements. Of course, temporary ‘transitory food insecurity’ shocks may be true in certain cases, mainly in the areas encroached by the highlanders. Compared to plough cultivation, which is found to be destructive to the fragile ecology (due to forest clearance), their traditional hand tools (especially the cultivating simple tool called *teba* and others) are best suited for their modes of eco-friendly livelihood and resource management, which not only benefits the present but also future generations.¹
2. Considering the statements quoted on the ‘complete Oromization of the Šinaša’ (p. 110) in comparison with other statements in the same work as well as considering the current ethnic political realities of Ethiopia and that of Mätäkkäl (where the Šinaša are the second governing group in the zone) it is rather difficult to accept the generalization which seems not fully substantiated with empirical evidence within the wider realities of the study area. On the other hand, the author’s preceding generalized arguments seem incompatible with his own expressions in the latter part of the same study: “... The Šinaša, together with the Gumuz, rose against the Oromo in southern Mätäkkäl.” (p. 125) Here ‘southern Mätäkkäl’ includes Wänbära and this statement cannot be substantiated with the former. Again, “... the Šinaša who moved into Mätäkkäl have kept their language and other cultural traits. Today they present a strong Šinaša identity ...” (p. 163). Such a presence of ‘strong Šinaša identity’ witnessed by the author cannot be substantiated with the previous idea of ‘complete Oromization’.

¹ For more details please see my dissertation: WOLDE-SELASSIE ABBUTE, *Gumuz and Highland Resettlers. Differing Strategies of Livelihood and Ethnic Reaction in Metekel, Northwestern Ethiopia* = Göttinger Studien zur Ethnologie 12. Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2002 (reviewed by DIRK BUSTORF in AETHIOPICA 10 (2007), 281–284).

“Inter-ethnic marriages are very common between the Oromo, Šinaša, Agäw, and Amhara. (...) In terms of language, too, most of the ethnic groups are trilingual, Oromiffa being the *lingua franca* in southern Mätäkkäl” (p. 166). Such ‘multi-linguality’ of Šinaša and their use of ‘Oromiffa’ as a ‘lingua-franca’ noted above does not justify speaking of their complete ‘Oromization’.

3. Some generalizing expressions and sections seem rather sketchy and require detailed supportive evidence or qualifying statements carefully. For instance, the expression “... the Šinaša of Dangur (...) went from Wänbära due to famine and retained strong ties” (p. 95) does not provide the reader with details on ‘when’ and ‘how’ the ‘famine’ displaced the ‘Šinaša’ and the way the group’s ‘intra-ethnic’ ties were maintained. Additionally, the sections on ‘intra-Agäw and intra-Amhara relations’ (pp. 101–102) and “Agäw- Šinaša relations’ (pp. 106–107) are very sketchy and described only in two short paragraphs each without offering adequate details to the reader.
4. Given the predominantly low-lying topography of Mätäkkäl in which 74 % of the area is flat plains, a generalizing statement such as “The topography of the region ... is rugged and broken here and there by mountains and streams ...” (p. 6) seems not true when applied to the whole of Mätäkkäl and the frontier area.
5. The library and archive review part of the research augmented by data from a previous MA research period is well done especially for the historical aspects of the study. However, the fieldwork duration for a PhD dissertation research on a socio-culturally complex subject of ‘ethnic relations’ covering an overall period of only seven months (March–June 2003; and February–April 2004) seems very short considering the limited time spent in the actual field. Some of the limitations stated could be attributed to such time constraints.
6. Unfortunately, the maps 5, 6, 7, 10 and 11 were not attached to the appendices.

On the whole, Tsega Endalew’s comprehensive and outstanding historical and socio-cultural study of the frontier area is a highly valuable and strongly recommendable book for all researchers, practitioners and policy makers interested in understanding and gaining deep insights in the past and present dynamism in Mätäkkäl, along the Ethio–Sudan borderlands.

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